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Miss Emeline's Kith and Kin

By

WINIFRED ARNOLD

Author of "Little Merry Christmas," "The Twins 'Pro' and 'Con,'" etc.

ILLUSTRATED

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NEW YORK CHICAGO

Fleming H. Revell Company

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I

A BIRTHDAY GIFT

MISS EMELINE PARLOW carefully wrung out her dish-cloth, wiped the last drop of moisture from her shining dish-pan, and stepped across the room to hang it methodically on the nail consecrated to its use between "the little spider" and the long iron spoon. An empty nail at the right of the sink seemed more convenient, but that had belonged for years to the saucepan now drying on the stove, so of course it was not to be thought of. If you had pressed her for information, Miss Emeline would doubtless have admitted that there are worse possible crimes in the world than hanging your possessions elsewhere than on the hereditary nail; but from her daily walk and conversation you would never have guessed that fact.

As she turned to the sink, her glance fell upon the advertising calendar which simpered incongruously beneath an austere kitchen clock.

"Humph," she ejaculated, seizing her sink cloth and beginning to polish the surface of her sink with great vigor. Even under ordinary circumstances, Miss Emeline would quite as soon have gone to

church with a dirty face as leave one drop of water on that precious sink, but to-day she scrubbed it till it shone like a black diamond.

As she stepped back to survey her completed work, however, another "humph" escaped her, apparently to her own surprise, and her eyes turned again toward the complacent blonde beauty.

"Well," she remarked suddenly with crisp emphasis, "what of it? It's the first of November,—I can see that without any specs on,—and it's my sixtieth birthday and there ain't no national celebration of the occasion, as fur as I've heard. There's the whole story in a nutshell, and praise be if nobody ain't interested in me. I ain't in nobody else, so we're even. Now see if you can quit that smirking and look more like a sensible human being. I wouldn't put up with your silly face one day longer, if I had any other calendar to tell the time of year by."

After which unwonted burst of imagination, Miss Emeline stepped across to the row of hooks behind the outside door and surveyed the motley array of head-gear which hung there. She had fallen heir to the accumulations of several maiden aunts, as well as to the belongings of her own mother and grandmother, and it was to her a sacred duty to wear out these possessions in order, just as she methodically used their spectacles on her own snapping black eyes, and economically

hoarded the medicines which had accumulated during numerous "last illnesses."

With her right hand she now took down the bonnet nearest the door, a real old-fashioned Shaker bonnet with a faded green gingham cape and green and white strings worn to yellow shreds by much tying.

"Well," she remarked, after a minute's critical survey, "I guess Aunt Bethia's Shaker has about seen its best days, and I'd be justified in passing on to Ma's slat bonnet." With her left hand she lifted down the next in the row, a red and green plaid sunbonnet and regarded first one and then the other.

"Well," she said again, "I s'pose maybe there *is* a day or two more of wear in that Shaker, but I guess I can take a little leeway on my sixtieth birthday. Anyway I hate shilly shally." And with three energetic steps she crossed the little kitchen to the stove into which she proceeded to cram Aunt Bethia's Shaker with a swiftness which argued no danger of "shilly shally" in that quarter.

With equal swiftness she tied the red and green bonnet over the gray streaked black hair which she still wore in a well-polished French twist, pinned Aunt Cely's little brown shawl around her shoulders, tightened the gingham apron strings which girdled her waist, and stepped briskly out into the November sunshine.

On a shelf in the little wood-house near by lay a neat array of gardening tools; and providing herself with a trowel and rake and a market basket, Miss Emeline proceeded to the front yard, and commenced to dig energetically in the little garden tract which bordered her white picket fence. And when Miss Emeline dug, she did so with the same whole-hearted intensity that had characterized her every motion for sixty years. To-day she dug even harder than usual as if to burrow out a refuge from some tormenting thought.

Suddenly an eager little voice above her head sounded down the tunnel of the slat bonnet.

"Oh, how do you do?" it cried. "You're Miss Emeline Parlow, aren't you? And do you mind telling me what's that you're digging? It looks like sweet potatoes, but I didn't know anybody raised 'em around here."

"Land sakes alive and Goshen!" ejaculated Miss Emeline, sinking back on her heels in surprise, and fixing her black eyes on the animated face above her. "Ain't you never seen a dahlia root, I'd like to know? What kind of heathen be you? I'd like to know."

The little girl laughed merrily. "Oh, I'm not a heathen. I'm just the opposite. I'm a missionary. But I was brought up in India and I never saw any dahlia roots before. What are you going to do with them? Eat 'em?"

"Eat 'em! Eat your grandmother!" retorted the scandalized Miss Emeline in a tone which suggested that the first thought outraged her feelings quite as much as the second. "Do they eat 'em in Injy? If that don't show all the good it does to send missionaries to them outlandish places! You're that little Mary Christie I've hearn tell about—ain't you? How old be you for the land sakes?"

"Fourteen years old day before yesterday," announced the visitor impressively. "You see I'm not a little girl at all. I'm a real young lady; and so of course Mother and all of us celebrated in the most elegant way. Isn't it beautiful to have a birthday?"

Miss Emeline began to dig again violently. "I hain't noticed it specially myself," she returned grimly. "To-day's my birthday and there ain't nothing beautiful about it as I see. What was there so fine about yours?"

"Oh-h, everything!" answered Mary Christie happily. "Everybody seemed so glad all day long, and everybody was so lovely to me. And a cake of course and presents—such *beauties!* Ribbons, and books, and a thimble, and a kodak! That was the loveliest thing I ever had! Uncle gave me that. Didn't you like your presents?"

"Can't very well like what you ain't got, can you? Who'd there be to give presents to an old

woman like me?—Not that I want any," Miss Emeline added hastily.

"No presents?" stammered the little girl. "Why, I thought everybody had birthday presents. I guess people must have forgotten the day—didn't they? You ought to have reminded them. I wish I had something here to give you. Have you got plenty of calendars?" she finished with a sudden smile.

"I've got a smirking nincompoop that I'd like to slap the face of every time I see her—if that's what you call a calendar," retorted Miss Emeline grimly.

Mary Christie gave an amused little chuckle. "I know what you mean—the one that advertises Salter's Soap. We've got one of those and Uncle Lem got so tired of it he cut a tomato out of a seed book and pasted over her face. It looks so funny in the middle of all that yellow hair. Well, I've got this Prayer Calendar here I'd love to give you if you'd like it. I was just taking it over to Mrs. Ellwood—she wanted to see one—but Mother's got three or four left, and it would be some sort of a birthday present, wouldn't it? And here's a geranium I picked to take her. You've got lots of flowers yourself, of course, but those that other people bring you always seem sweeter someway, don't they? Won't you please take them, Miss Parlow? And allow me to wish you many happy returns of the day," she ended quaintly.

Miss Parlow ignored the geranium. "What's a Prayer Calendar?" she demanded. "Some missionary folderol, ain't it? I ain't a heathen, thank you. Abby Ellwood needs it worse than I do."

Mary Christie laughed again, as if life and grim old ladies were one long sweet joke.

"Oh, it's you that do the praying," she exclaimed cheerfully, "for the missionaries, you know—a different one every day. We were in last year and it was lovely. All day long, you see, you remember how people all over the world are praying for you; naming your very own name to God, you know, and asking His blessing on you and for Him to be with you and give you strength. It makes you feel so near to everybody! Father said he felt like ten men after it, he was so light-hearted and strong. It's Miss Singer at Fu Chow for to-day. We prayed for her in family prayers this morning. See?" She opened the book and pointed to the date.

"And to-morrow—let's see—it's Reverend and Mrs. Cyrus Brown. Why, *I* know them! There are two little Brown girls—the sweetest things! Isn't that interesting? And day after to-morrow it's—— Oh, look!" In her excitement she nearly impaled herself on the picket fence as she thrust her toes through and leaned across to wave the calendar under Miss Parlow's very nose. "Look! Day after to-morrow it's Miss E. *Par-*

low! Did you ever hear anything like it? You'll have to play you're in China—a missionary! Do you suppose E. stands for Emeline?"

Few people can resist the fascination of looking at their own names in print—particularly when that event occurs but seldom in a lifetime, and Miss Emeline seized the calendar so promptly that her guest toppled unceremoniously over the white pickets and landed on top of the dahlia roots in a manner most blighting to the dignity of "a real young lady" aged fourteen years and two days.

However she had righted herself like a rubber ball before Miss Emeline had even clambered to her feet.

"Well, what's up now?" gasped that lady, drawing Aunt Nancy's rubber-rimmed eye-glasses from her apron pocket and adjusting them on her high bridged nose.

"Both of *us* are," giggled Mary Christie jocosely. "Did you ever see anything so funny as the way I fell off that fence? I wish I could be on the outside of myself when I do things like that. I miss such a lot of fun by being inside sometimes."

"You'll wish you was outside for sure one of these days when you break every bone in your body being so heedless. You mashed your bokay too, that you was carrying to Abby Ellwood."

Mary Christie picked up her geranium and regarded it ruefully. Like Aunt Bethia's Shaker, it

had evidently "seen its best days." But Mary's clouds were never provided with mere linings of silver. They seemed to come wrapped in shining possibilities like sweet chocolate in tinfoil.

"Oh, Miss Parlow," she cried joyfully, after a minute, "now isn't it just wonderful how beautifully things turn out? That geranium wasn't very nice anyway. I was really ashamed to give it to you for your birthday—your own flowers are so much nicer. But now, if you'll only give me leave to pick some of your lovely chrysanthemums, I'll give you a bunch back for your birthday, and carry the others to Mrs. Ellwood and then everybody'll be better off."

Miss Emeline stared at her through the rubber-rimmed glasses and then took them off in order to see better.

"Well, you certainly are the beatinest young one I've seen in a month of Sundays," she ejaculated, with a grim smile. "Them chrysanthemums have slept under my old blazing star bed quilt every night for a month, so they'd ought to be fair to middling. Flowers needs as much care as children, but I've always been a great hand for 'em."

Mary Christie flung herself enthusiastically upon her knees before the mass of sturdy little chrysanthemums. "They are perfectly lovely!" she cried. "I'm going to pick yours first. Oh, I know what I'll do. Will you give me a round glass dish

and I'll fix them like a star; a yellow star on a red ground. That'll be fine for your birthday and besides it would be a nice compliment to the star bed quilt." She ended with her usual gay little chuckle.

Somewhere in Miss Emeline's heart a warm little memory stirred of a birthday when she was six years old and young Aunt Cely cut out cookies in the shape of six-pointed stars and baked them "to celebrate." Now she was sixty years old and only that morning she had quoted grimly —

> "I care for nobody, no, not I,
> And nobody cares for me."

And yet here was somebody else fixing a star "to celebrate." And just the least little wave of softness washed over her stern old heart.

Being a typical New England spinster, however, Miss Emeline covered it up with the most forbidding "humph" to be found in her whole collection of forbidding monosyllables; but she scurried briskly around the house nevertheless; and soon returned with a round glass dish on a pedestal.

"Be careful of that now," she continued curtly. "That was Ma's best preserve dish that Grandmother Sisson give her when she was married. I'll set it on the front door-step, and you can go over there to fix your contraptions."

"All right," agreed Mary happily. "And you

sit right down beside it, won't you, and keep guard over that lovely dish. You can look at your calendar some more while I work if you like. Does it say anything else about your double? Lots of times it tells things about them."

Miss Emeline scanned the page with an eagerness she vainly tried to conceal. "Miss E. Parlow"—she read again, with a queer little tinge of pride in her tones; "'a very important field,' it says, 'and a fine work'; then it tells how many converts and all that, and then it ends up with a Scripture text: 'Before they call I will answer and while they are yet speaking I will hear.' And down below: 'More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of.'"

Mary Christie nodded. "Yes. That's what Father says lots of times. Oh, Miss Parlow, wouldn't it be queer if some of those prayers should help you instead? People just praying for Miss E. Parlow, you know. Maybe the angels would get the prayers mixed; or maybe God would count them for both of you. There, the star is done. It's a little lopsided, but pretty good, don't you think?

"Good-bye, and many, many happy returns!"

"Good-bye," answered Miss Emeline mechanically. "Good-bye, child, and you're very welcome."

II

"BEFORE THEY CALL"

AT the corner Mary Christie turned to wave another farewell, but Miss Emeline, still sitting on her door-stone, did not see her. She was gazing intently at the yellow star in the glass bowl beside her; but her thoughts were full of the words of her strange little guest. From long living alone, she had the habit of thinking aloud. "S'posing things should get mixed up and some folkses prayers should count for me instead of that foreign E. Parlow. 'Twould seem funny to have folks praying for you, wouldn't it? I wonder what the Lord would do for you on the strength of it? Oh, shucks! The Lord ain't done a thing for me in so long I guess likely He's forgot there is such a person."

And leaving the yellow star to blaze alone on the front door-stone, she rose abruptly, and began to dig up dahlia roots with renewed ardor.

"I wonder how they pray for these missionary folks," she murmured after a while. "What was it that young one said? 'Naming your name to

God and asking His blessing on you and for Him to be with you.' Land, that's just young one's talk —like her angels getting mixed up. When she gets to be sixty years old she'll know how much religion amounts to. I've always told the truth, and been honest, and done my duty according to my lights, and what have I got to show for it? Folks all dead and gone—not a speck of kith nor kin left. The Lord has clean forgot me, like everybody else.

"Sometimes I wonder if there—really—is—any ——" She drew herself up sharply. "No, I guess for the sake of the Parlow name I won't turn infidel in my old age." Then with a quaint little touch of humor: "Might shame my cousin E-liza that's a missionary."

With surprising agility she scrambled to her feet and began to gather up her tools and the pile of roots which it took two or three trips to carry away to their usual corner of the cellar. Finally she came back for the bowl of chrysanthemums and the calendar, which lay side by side on the door-step.

"Kind of tasty," she remarked meditatively. "I always did like star pattern. Guess I'll put it on the settin'-room table. Looks kind of folksy, as if somebody cared whether I was alive or dead. Her ma ain't brought her up not to neighbor, I guess. She'll have somebody to do for, likely,

even when her own kith and kin dies. Mebbe it's a good plan."

Placing the bowl in the exact center of the turkey red table-cover, she returned briskly to the kitchen, with the calendar in her hand, and faced the simpering blonde sternly. "Down you come, miss," she announced. "I never expected to litter up my kitchen with any prayer calendars, but I always stick to my word, anyway; and I said I wouldn't stand you another day if I had any other kind of calendar to take your place. So here you go, after Aunt Bethia's Shaker. I'll stick your head right into it. Mebbe that will teach you some sense." And with a grim sense of humor that occasionally struggled to the surface, she pulled out the charred fragments of the old bonnet and thrust it over the calendar's head before she lit the fire for supper.

Then, carefully adjusting the cardboard leaves of her new possession, so that the page for the week hung uppermost, she placed it on the little brass hook that had supported the family calendar ever since the Parlows had boasted such a possession.

"I wish it told more about that other E. Parlow," she murmured, as she went about her simple preparations. "'Tain't like any of our Parlows to waste their time off on wild goose chases to the heathen. As Ma always said, 'Tend to your own

business and the Lord'll tend to Hisn.' Sometimes I wondered what Hisn was, and how He tended to it."

Then she relapsed again into silence as she sat down at her little table and poured her cups of strong green tea and buttered the thin slices of bread with which she ate a scanty dish of apple-sauce, finishing with a piece of custard pie and a bit of cheese.

Still in silence she carried away the remains of the supper, washed her dishes and put them in place, and swept up the invisible crumbs which she might have let fall beneath the table.

Then, as she wound the clock for the night, she glanced shamefacedly over her shoulder and took the little calendar down from the brass hook.

"I'd kind of like to see if there are any other names I know," she said apologetically half-aloud, and slipping the green reading shade over her little kerosene lamp, she carried them both to the sitting-room where she poked up the fire in the little "air-tight" stove and then proceeded to settle herself by the red-covered table for the evening.

Great-Aunt Betsey's thick, steel-bowed spectacles over her eyes hindered rather than aided her progress, but she read on eagerly.

"Humph," she muttered after a while. "What a power of folks asking other folks to pray for 'em! Why can't they pray for themselves, I

wonder? I was always taught to." Then after a minute she added honestly, "Not that I've kept it up so stiddy, but missionaries would, I should think likely. They seem to believe in it so thorough. What was E. Parlow's text there? 'Before they call I will answer, and while they are yet speaking I will hear.' Two other folks in this calendar so far have that too—and I ain't half through. It must be a great favorite. I s'pose that's when you're praying for others. I wonder if many will pray for E. Parlow—the Chinee one, I mean. Mercy land, it's going on nine o'clock and me not in bed yet. What in the world would Ma say?"

Swiftly she went about her preparations for the night, and in an incredibly short time she stood ready to climb into the feather bed which awaited her in the next room. Just at the bedside, she hesitated for a moment, then shook her head grimly. "What's the use?" she muttered. "I ain't neither a heathen nor a missionary. Kith and kin is all I want and the Lord Himself couldn't give me that once He's took it all away. I ain't seen no use to pray since the last one died."

But in the black eyes, as Miss Emeline closed them firmly for the night, was just a drop of moisture to dampen the little seed that a child's unconscious hand had that day sown in her heart.

The next morning, however, brought no signs of

helpful moisture or even of the little seed itself. Miss Emeline rose, as usual, at the crack of dawn, and her first act on reaching the kitchen was to turn the poor little Prayer Calendar face to the wall.

"Wish I'd had the sense to paste a tomato on the other like Lem Perkins," she said sternly. "Now I've got this mess of truck to stare me in the face. Lucky I've got a full day's work sweeping the house, so I shan't have to see it under my nose all the time."

But even an energetic lady with a microscopic eye for dust cannot find so very many traces of that foe in a house that is swept and garnished from top to bottom every Friday and mostly closed tight against the invader between-times. So by early afternoon Miss Emeline's sphere of labor was again restricted to the kitchen.

To save her life, Miss Emeline could not have told you who wrote "Order is Heaven's first law," but it was as instinctively her "rule of faith and practice" as if she had collaborated in its expression. The disorderly appearance of her hapless calendar, therefore, was too much for her peace of mind, and with a brisk jerk she returned it to "the first position." Under pretense of straightening the leaves, she leaned forward till she read again: "'Miss E. Parlow'—some unpronounceable name—'Chiny.' 'Before they call I will answer'—I

wonder if she thinks He's begun answering for her a'ready. 'More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of.' Humph! What things, I wonder? I'll bet a cooky I could dream of things that couldn't be wrought by prayer—not by a long shot!"

Out in her front yard again, as she raked up a few scattered leaves, her thoughts once more struggled into speech. "If You could ——" she said slowly. "If You could—somehow—give me some folks of my own to do for again. But there—of course You can't—nobody could. And someway I can't feel interest outside of my own folks.—This ain't a prayer, of course. I don't know how to pray, I guess, but ——" Suddenly she broke off short. "Oh, land! What's the use? God does what He wants to—plans it all out and goes straight ahead. What's the sense of praying, I'd like to know? What difference will it make to E. Parlow that's over in China that to-morrow's her day and folks are going to ask for her to be blessed? He ain't thought about me to bless or curse for many a day." Poor blind Miss Emeline! As if the ache in her stern old heart were not the weight of His own hand, softening the ground around that little seed of blessing as it sent out its tendrils of hope and trust.

That night Miss Emeline ate her solitary supper before "candle-light" and then frankly retired to

the sitting-room with the lamp and the Prayer Calendar which she finished perusing before bedtime came around. "It beats all," she said thoughtfully as she laid the steel-rimmed spectacles neatly on the table and leaned her head back against the patchwork cover of Aunt Bethia's rocker. "It does beat all how much faith these missionaries seem to put in prayer—and the texts they seem to base it on. Land, if you believe half of them texts, you'd expect to get anything you wanted if you only pray hard enough. I've most a mind to try it. No. I guess I'll wait till tomorrow and begin square with the other one. 'Oh Lord,' I'll say, 'bless E. Parlow—both on 'em.' What else was it that young one said? 'Be with us and bless us in our work—missions and all.' If she can spare 'em, count one or two of her prayers for me. There ain't nobody to pray for me—you know. And, oh Lord,'" her old voice thrilled with passionate yearning, "'Oh Lord, if You can do all they say You can, give me somebody to do for again, give me some folks, oh Lord!'

"There now," she added after a minute, steadying her voice with an effort, "that's about the way I'll have to pray, I guess—but I'll wait till morning to do it. I'd give a lot if I could believe in it, like they do."

In the early dawn, Miss Emeline wakened and

lay still, gazing out at the pink flush on the horizon. A sacred hush seemed to fill the room—a strange sense of peace stole over her. "Is it You, oh Lord?" she whispered, and even as she did so a warm feeling in her heart—that stern, frost-bound heart—seemed to answer her. With a transfigured face, she sat up in bed and looked out across the rime-covered fields toward the rosy dawn that flushed brighter and brighter as she looked.

"Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts," chanted the myriad voices of the opening day.

"Oh, it *is* You," she cried in wondering awe, struggling to her knees in sudden reverence. "Before we called You have answered—it's You that are here with me—and this is Your blessing. Oh Lord, forgive me for doubting You," she sobbed, covering her face with her hands. "I know now that somehow—even if I can't see how—You'll give me all I've asked."

III

"ANGELS UNAWARES"

TO a few fortunate natures, a great spiritual experience is like a beneficent cataclysm, forming for them at once a new heaven and a new earth. But to most of us it is more like the seed which must sprout and grow and ripen through many hours of waiting before it brings forth its harvest of blessing.

In the old Parlow house life went on apparently much the same through the crisp November days. Outwardly its mistress was quite unchanged, but in her heart the little seed lived in a warm and precious memory which quieted for a time the old hunger for kith and kin. And already, its little sprouts of Faith and Hope were filling her daily round with more quiet happiness than she had felt in years.

"Beats all what a fine long fall we're having!" she exclaimed one morning, as she opened her back door and stepped out upon its flat gray door-stone. Her morning housework was safely "out of the way"; every inch of the square white house was as tidy as her two hands could make it; a fresh

loaf of bread and two flaky pies were cooling on the pantry window-sill, and Miss Emeline felt that she had already earned the luxury of a day of outdoor work. "Puttering around the yard and garden," as she expressed it, had been for a long time the only real pleasure in her rather barren existence, and with her garden-tools in hand, and a whole golden day before her, she felt like a child out of school.

"Some more leaves and stuff have blowed into the nor'west corner of the yard," she said aloud, as she surveyed her little domain with a capable eye. "I guess I'd better begin and rake up first, and have a bonfire while the wind is right."

She tightened the ends of the little checked shawl which was crossed over her chest and tied behind, fastened her "slat-bunnet" still more securely under her chin, and stepped swiftly back to the little wood-shed which was joined on to her kitchen-ell. Pulling out the wheelbarrow which stood inside, she proceeded to load it with two or three empty baskets, and her rakes and hoe, and then trundled it swiftly to the "nor'west" corner of her neat little front yard.

The sun shone radiantly over the fall landscape, the crisp November air sent her blood tingling pleasantly through her veins, and though she herself would have been the first to admit that she couldn't carry a tune to save her soul, she was soon

rendering "Old Hundred" (with many variations) as she raked and gathered the crisp brown leaves.

"How soon are you going to have your bonfire?" inquired an interested voice behind her, as she rose from tucking a few last leaves into an already heaping bushel-basket. "Because if you are going to have it right away, I can stay a minute or two and watch it."

"For the mercy's sakes," ejaculated Miss Emeline, turning quickly, "how you scat me, Mary Christie! You mustn't walk up on folks unbeknownst like that! Some real nervy women, now, you might have sent clear into conniption fits."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," answered Mary penitently, "but do you know it never occurred to me that I could be too quiet to suit people. Mother is all the time having to say 'Sh' at our house. There are so many of us, you know, and we all wear such thick shoes and have such good times. And I was so pleased when I saw that you were raking leaves. I do love a bonfire! Don't you?"

Miss Emeline's face softened. "Oh, well, sissy, never mind," she said kindly. "You startled me so that I spoke sorter quick, but I ain't hurt a mite, and o' course you can see my bonfire. I couldn't prevent ye, I guess," she added with a grim smile, "seeing that I always have 'em out in the middle of the road where they'll be safe. If you want to open the gate now I'll trundle the wheelbarrow

right out and begin. I've got two good basketfuls and I guess that's all there is in sight."

As she spoke, she began lifting her baskets on to the waiting wheelbarrow, while her guest flew to fling wide the small white gate.

"Everything does happen so beautifully!" carolled Mary as she gathered up some little twigs and stray papers to add to the blaze. "To think of my just going by like this when the bonfire was almost ready to light! I couldn't have stopped but a minute or two, for I'm on my way to do a very important errand."

"How do you happen to be out of school to-day?" inquired Miss Emeline. "Young ones now'days seem to have holidays every tack and turn. When I went to school, we *went;* didn't stay out celebrating something or other half the time. Might I inquire what sort of contraption you folks are celebrating now?"

Mary Christie giggled cheerfully. "You'd never guess, and I don't know as you'd really call it celebrating," she answered. "It's measles! Isn't that the biggest joke? Every one of the children at our house has them except me. They all came down at once, day before yesterday. Mother doesn't think I will because I had them when I was a baby, but I'm staying home a few days to run errands and help Mother and Aunt Em Caldwell. As soon as Aunt Em heard about it she came over

to stay with us. Isn't she a dear? She sent Uncle Deacon to visit his married daughter. And now I'm going up to Mrs. Ellwood's to see if she wants some company too."

"Who's the company? You?" inquired Miss Emeline with sudden interest.

"Oh dear me, no," reproved her small guest. "Why, how could my family get along without me to help? My Uncle Lem says he couldn't keep house without me for a minute. And I don't really believe he could," her voice dropped to a confidential note. "Men are so awfully helpless, you know. I take care of Uncle all the time, and Father too. No—it's the Browns—at least we *think* it's the Browns. Father, you see, has been up in Boston at a big missionary meeting for a week now. And just this morning we got a postal card from there saying he'd be here to-night with some old friends to make a visit. Mother thinks it's the Browns—for the Rev. Cyrus has had to come home for a year or so on account of his health, just like Father. And the Browns have two little girls, the sweetest things! And a rather new baby, too. And of course we can't let them come and get measles—and yet it seems an awful pity to let them pay all that money for tickets for nothing. And it's too late to let them know. So Mother thought maybe Mrs. Ellwood might like to have them visit her instead."

"Two grown folks and three children," commented Miss Emeline dryly—as she poured a few more leaves onto the blazing pile. "Your ma has more faith in Abby Ellwood than some. But you'd better run right along, I guess. She never keeps nothing on hand. She'll have to put in most of to-day baking up."

"That's so," agreed Mary hastily. "We always have so much cooked up at our house that I never thought of that. Good-bye, Miss Parlow; I'd better run. Maybe there'll be some bonfire left when I come back."

With one hand holding her whipping skirts carefully away from the fire, while the other shielded her eyes, Miss Emeline turned and watched her little guest as she ran briskly away down the country road.

"Funny of Mis' Christie to pick Abby Ellwood," she muttered. "Her house is small and she ain't any kind of a cook, though I s'pose Mis' Christie don't know that. Anyway, I'm glad she didn't send to me.—I'd 'a' hated to say 'no' to that little gal—she's so folksy and sociable—but land, I couldn't never be bothered with a parcel of young ones, racketing around, to say nothing of their pa and ma.

"'Rev. Cyrus Brown,'" she said slowly. "Why, that's one of the names on my prayer calendar. Makes you feel kind of acquainted with 'em, some-

way. Wonder if they knew my namesake, Miss E. Parlow, that's on there next to 'em?"

She finished emptying her second basket of leaves as she spoke and raked in the edges of the fire with a skilful hand, but more and more slowly, as one will whose mind is possessed by an absorbing thought. Suddenly she stopped entirely.

"No 'tain't," she said aloud. "'Tain't no answer to my prayer. What I asked for was some of my own kith and kin to do for again—to live with me —grown-ups too; not a parcel of young ones on a visit. B'sides, they're going to Abby Ellwood's, so what call have I got to bother?"

With determined hand she grasped the wheelbarrow handles again, packed up her baskets, and returned them to the wood-shed. The fire was almost burnt out when she returned, but she fed the blaze carefully with some more dry twigs, glancing up the road every now and then as she did so.

"What takes that child so long?" she murmured as the last little blaze finally flickered out. "Thought she was coming right back. I s'pose she got to visiting with Abby same as she always does.

"Oh, there she comes now, but she don't seem so spry as usual, someway. It can't be that Abby's had the face to say she wouldn't. Seems kind of a pity to disappoint a child like that.

"Well, what's up?" she called as Mary got

within hearing distance. "Wouldn't she take your folks in?"

"She wasn't at home," returned Mary soberly. "There was a paper in her door saying she'd gone away to visit her daughter in Greenboro for a week. So I went on to Mrs. Slocum's, too. That's why I was gone so long. But her Ruby came down with the measles this morning, so that won't do. Well, I'll just have to go and find somebody else, that's all. Who do you think I'd better try?"

"Well now," returned Miss Emeline discouragingly, "I can't say I'm surprised. I don't believe you'll find anybody that'll want to take in a man and his wife and three noisy young ones for a week. If they was our own kith and kin, we'd have to, of course, but folks can't be bothered entertaining perfect strangers like that. They're old friends to your folks, of course, but I guess you forget that they're perfect strangers to all the rest of the folks around here."

"Why, so they are, aren't they?" cried Mary Christie, cheering up quite unexpectedly. "I just thought of their being the Browns and friends of ours. Of course they're awfully nice, but it's only when people are strangers to you that they may turn out to be angels unawares.

"Won't Mrs. Waters laugh when I walk in and offer her five perfectly nice angels that are Brown?"

IV

LABORERS TOGETHER

MISS EMELINE sighed deeply as her little guest turned away. "It's a sin and a shame to think of the hard knocks that child's going to get in this world," she said aloud. "Folks ain't out entertaining other folks free gratis now'days on the chance of their turning out angels. They want 'em guaranteed beforehand and plenty of money to boot." Suddenly her voice changed and softened. "There, there, I'm a hard old woman, and I hope You'll see Your way to forgiving me, Lord. Mebbe when I get better acquainted with You I won't feel as I do."

Without even a glance up the road, she closed her snapping black eyes and bent her head as she added:

"I ain't ungrateful, Lord, for what You've done for me already; and I ain't forgot; and I know You'll answer my prayers someway, hard as they be to work out. But 'tain't angels that I want, oh Lord, You know that. It's some of my own folks once more—to do for in the old Parlow house——" She opened her eyes slowly, and stood looking down the road toward the village until Mary

Christie's flying feet had carried her quite out of sight.

Then she stooped and raked apart every bit of her fire, piled her tools neatly on the barrow and trundled her way out to her vegetable garden where she busied herself for the rest of the morning with a determined shutting-out of every thought which could lead away from the matter in hand. After her solitary dinner had been eaten and "cleared away," however, she made a special trip to the pantry and surveyed her hanging pie-shelf with decided disfavor.

"Only one whole one," she said aloud, "and one that I've eaten a piece out of for dinner; and not more than six or eight cookies left in the cooky-jar. Nice slack way for a housekeeper to be caught in case she should have unexpected company happen in. What would Ma think if she could see such works, I wonder?"

No "unexpected company" had troubled the peace of the Parlow homestead for twenty years or more—but of course, as Miss Emeline murmured half-embarrassed, to herself, "there has to be a first time for everything and it's always best to be prepared."

Miss Emeline was a very swift worker, and it was not very long before a line of flaky mince-pies were smoking appetizingly upon the pie-shelf, while three milk-pans with cooling cookies spread

carefully around their sides and over their bottoms promised well for the future of the empty cooky-jar.

"And now," commented Miss Emeline crisply, "I've let myself run pretty nigh out of lard. What would I do if I should get caught sudden and want to make baking-powder biscuits for tea? I hate to think how Ma would feel if she knew. I'd better go straight down to the village with my lard-pail."

With capable hands she put the little kitchen and pantry swiftly to rights, changed her dress for her second-best black alpaca (made over from one of Aunt Polly's), tied on her second-best bonnet (that had been Aunt Cely's), counted out a dollar's worth of change from the blue bowl on the second pantry-shelf, and set out for the village with the empty lard-pail swinging stiffly at her side.

When she came down the steps of the village Emporium, however, not only had the lard-pail been filled, but two knobby paper parcels in her left arm represented the unusual extravagance of half a dozen oranges and a pound of animal crackers.

Just what explanation of the animal crackers Miss Emeline was going to make to her subconscious self, she had not even allowed herself to think, but at sight of little Mary Christie coming out of the Post-Office, a dull red flush certainly suffused her weather-beaten cheek.

"Well, so here you be again," she exclaimed after an embarrassed moment. "Who'd you find to take in your party of angels, I'd like to inquire?"

But Mary Christie's usually dancing eyes were clouded with disappointment.

"Oh, Miss Parlow," she answered, "I didn't find anybody. I've asked everybody that Mother could think of, and some she couldn't, and, do you know, there isn't a single soul! And they all have the very best reasons, too; sickness or other company or no spare room, or something like that. I don't understand it, really. Of course there's some good reason, for Mother and all of us have prayed as hard as we could and worked as hard as we could to help the Lord answer us, too, and it doesn't look as if He had. Mother thinks maybe it's to keep the Browns from getting the measles. Do you suppose that is what it is?"

But Miss Emeline's attention had been rivetted by an earlier sentence. "What do you mean by that," she inquired, "helping the Lord to answer your prayers? The Lord is all-powerful, ain't He? When we put things in His hands it's His business to tend to 'em, ain't it, without our putting our fingers in the pie?"

Mary Christie's brows puckered in the little serious frown which she wore when she was most interested.

"Why, I *love* to help, don't you? It's such a—such a compliment, someway, don't you think, for Him to let us? Mother says she thinks the nicest thing in the Bible is about our being laborers together with God. And she says He almost always shows us a place where we can take hold and help and we get our answers that way."

"Humph!" returned Miss Emeline thoughtfully. "I want to know. Well, what are you going to do with all those folks, then? Stick 'em back on the train and tell 'em to go where angels are more wanted?"

Mary sighed. "It does sound awful, doesn't it?" she said. "But that's just about what we've got to do. They'll be so disappointed; I could just cry to think of it!

"The minister and his wife, you see, have only got one extra bed, but they'll keep them over night, somehow; and Uncle Lem says he'll pay their fares so they won't lose all that money for nothing. So it could have turned out lots worse, couldn't it? And I wouldn't want those two dear little Brown girls and the baby to catch measles just to answer our prayers, of course. Good-bye, Miss Parlow; I've got to run home with this letter. Miss Watkins put it in the wrong box this morning."

As once before that day, Miss Emeline turned and watched Mary Christie's flying figure, as it departed.

"So that's Mis' Christie's idee of answers to prayer, is it?" she said slowly, half-aloud, as was her wont. "Well, land knows it does sound more self-respecting than laying yourself down flat on the Lord's mercy without raising a finger yourself. Kinder sensible, too. S'posing I just asked Him for a nasturtium-bed, now, and never planted the seeds! But 'tain't my own prayers I've got a chance of helping answer, it's other folkses. Think of that, now! That would be 'laboring with God,' if you dast to call it so.

"Land knows I never done such a thing before—but here I be all cooked up, and yesterday was sweeping-day, so the house can't be very dirty. I —believe—I'll do it!"

Without giving herself time for another thought, she turned and grabbed hold of a small boy, that happened to be passing. "You run and ketch that Mary Christie up there and bring her back here," she said, "and I'll give you a cent. Flax along, now."

With loud cries of "Mary, hey, Mary Christie," the small boy promptly "flaxed," and in an amazingly short time he and his prey were standing breathless before Miss Emeline, who had walked to meet them.

"Here's your cent, and much obliged," she said crisply to her messenger; "don't buy some mess that will make you sick now." She dismissed him

with a wave of the lard-pail and turned to the little girl.

"If you think them folks would like to come to my house for a week's visit, why, I guess I can take them in. I ain't much used to cooking and fussin' 'round for young ones, but I've got room enough for them to sleep, and I won't give 'em measles, anyhow. You go tell your ma."

With an ecstatic squeal, Mary Christie rushed and flung her arms around Miss Emeline in a bear-hug which almost ground the animal crackers to fragments.

"Oh, you dear, dear thing!" she cried. "Oh, I was just hoping and hoping all day that you would, only I didn't quite dare to ask you, for I thought if you wanted to you'd offer. Oh, I'm so glad, and I know they'll have the *nicest* time at your house! I'd love to visit there! I'll run home now and tell Mother, and then when the train comes in, Father and I will bring them right up."

"Are they coming on the five o'clock?" demanded Miss Emeline.

Mary nodded. "Yes, and oh, won't they be pleased! I must ——"

But Miss Emeline was not listening. "Mercy land!" she ejaculated, turning suddenly, "and me down here to the village gossiping instead of home making up the beds and lighting the fires and setting the table for tea. Them missionaries will

wonder what kind of heathen I be!" And with a swiftness of motion that belied her sixty years, she had walked some distance down the country road before Mary Christie recovered herself sufficiently to fly away homeward with her happy news.

The "five o'clock" (which was really the five-twenty) was just on time that night, but Miss Emeline had always prided herself on being "a master hand at turning off work," and by the time the bus drove up with its load of passengers, the old white house was glowing with warmth and welcome; wood-fires were crackling comfortably in the Franklin heaters in the parlor and the big "parlor bedroom" opposite, and a lighted lamp, discreetly turned down, stood on each center-table. Up-stairs another bedroom had been prepared for the children.

A snowy tea-table stood spread in the sitting-room—for visiting "angels," Miss Emeline had decided with a grim smile, couldn't decently be asked to eat in the kitchen.

Potatoes were already bubbling gaily in the iron pot, and a generous spiderful of pink slices of ham was waiting on the back of the stove.

"It's more like a dinner than a supper," she was apologizing to herself, "but the poor things will be half froze, likely, and a hot meal will taste good to 'em."

Just at that moment, the long unused front door-

bell gave a terrific peal, and, nervously smoothing down her immaculate white apron, Miss Emeline hastened to answer it.

With the parlor lamp held high in one hand she flung wide the door with the other—and then stood staring at the group before her. The first one was Mary Christie, there was no doubt of that; behind her stood her father, but there was only one other person with them, a slight young woman whose bag Mr. Christie was carrying. Certainly she could hardly be Rev. and Mrs. Cyrus Brown and three children.

Mary Christie's happy little laugh broke the silence. "It's a surprise party, isn't it, Miss Parlow?" she said gaily. "Such a joke on everybody. It isn't the Browns at all. That is, it's Mr. Brown—but he's out in the bus now. Mrs. Brown and the children weren't there at all, and he's not afraid of the measles, so he's going home with us. And this—oh, Miss Emeline, this is the loveliest surprise you ever, ever knew! This is that other Miss E. Parlow—the one from China that was on your Prayer Calendar! Did you ever know anything so wonderful in all your life?"

"Well, I am beat!" ejaculated Miss Emeline slowly. "Land sakes alive and Goshen! Well, come in, all of you, out of the cold, while I kinder thresh this out in my mind."

But the Christies had to go back to the Rev. Cy-

rus, and in another minute Miss Emeline and her guest were standing face to face in the quaint old parlor bedroom.

With a wonderful smile irradiating her pale face, Miss E. Parlow spoke. "Oh, this looks so homelike and comfortable!" she cried impulsively. "And you were *so* good to ask me to visit you! Better than you know!"

She stepped forward with her hands outstretched. "You see, I haven't any people of my own at all—and particularly when you're not quite well—sometimes it makes you feel so awfully lonely! And when they said I was going to visit a lady named Parlow, all of a sudden I felt as if I did belong somewhere and to somebody after all. Do you understand, I wonder?"

"Uh-humph," answered Miss Emeline curtly, to cover a queer little sound in her throat. "Um-humph." For the life of her she could not have said more just now. But she took the outstretched hands in hers, and looked kindly into the upturned blue eyes.

"What might be your name, other E. Parlow?" she inquired, after a minute. "In the calendar it only said E. I guessed mebbe it was Eliza."

"So little Mary Christie told me," smiled the other "E. Parlow," "but you didn't guess exactly. It's Emily instead. I might almost be named for you, mightn't I?"

Miss Emeline nodded. "If you was my niece, now," she said, "that might be the newfangled way your folks had fixed it over. I almost feel as if it was, mebbe. Anyway, you take off your hat and make yourself to home while I go out into the kitchen and cut down on our provisions some. You don't look just rugged enough, someway, to eat the supper I had ready for five. You lay down if you want to, and rest up before supper. I'll call you when I'm ready,—Em'ly."

With a new light in her eyes, Emily Parlow began pulling the pins out of her hat. "I shan't be long," she cried, "and I want to come out into the kitchen and help. The doctor said all I needed was a winter at home—and I begin to feel so much better already. You will let me come out into the kitchen, won't you? And—and—may I call you Aunt Emeline just while I'm here? I guess I'm—homesick, for the home I haven't got."

Miss Emeline turned away to hide the softening of her lips.

"All right, Em'ly, I dunno as I mind," she agreed hastily, with her hand on the door, "and as to the kitchen, you can find it by following your nose, I guess. I'm going to fry some ham and eggs. You're going to need building up with strengthening food; I see that. The Parlows never could stand it to get over-het. Your folks oughtn't to have let you go to China."

But when Emily followed, after a hasty toilet, she found Miss Emeline not in the kitchen but in the sitting-room, peering through Great-Aunt Betsey's spectacles at the thickly written pages of the old family Bible.

"I've just found out that my father had a Cousin John that went out to Californy in '49, and was never heard of afterward," she announced. "If you don't know nothing to the contrary, we'll call him your grandfather, just while you're here. John's a common enough name to take the risk."

"And it may be true," said Emily Parlow, softly. "I think his name was John. Oh, wouldn't it be wonderful if I had come way over here from China to find somebody of my very own?"

"That's what Mary Christie meant by angels unawares, I guess," returned Miss Emeline, "only the Lord Himself knows that kith and kin mean a lot more to me than angels, someway—me being a wicked old woman, probably. 'Tain't no disrespect—but I'd ruther you turned out to be a niece unbeknownst than the Angel Gabriel himself!"

V

OUR FOLKS

"LAST of all, Aunt Bethia passed away," said Miss Emeline, peeling her turnips with a swift but careful hand; "ten years ago the fifth of September it was —— And land sakes alive," she interpolated briskly, "whatever she'd have said to the wasteful thickness of that, I dunno!" Thriftily scraping out from her last paring a fragment of paper-like thinness, she dropped back into her reminiscent tone: "Ten years ago the fifth of September; and since then I've lived here all stark staring alone without no kith nor kin in this wide world, and would be to-day if I hadn't 'a' tried a little 'laboring,' I s'pose."

Emily Parlow smiled understandingly across the little kitchen table. "Just like me," she said. "But now that we've adopted each other we can't say that any more, can we, Aunt Emeline? I'm sure ——"

"Rat—tat—tat—tat! Rat—tat—tat—tat!" came the sound of active little knuckles on the back door, saying as plainly as knuckles could: "Please let—me—in! Please—let—me—in!"

"I'll bet a cooky it's Mary Christie," said Miss Emeline, laying down her knife and turning swiftly toward the door. "That sounds just like her someway."

"What an awfully good guesser! That's because you're a Yankee, I suppose," bubbled a gay little voice, as its owner stepped inside. "I heard you say 'Mary Christie' right through the door. Isn't it funny how you can always hear your own name?

"Good-morning, Miss Parlow. Good-morning, Miss Emily. Oh, it *is* the be-yoo-ti-flest day you ever saw, so bright and crisp! Why don't you two go out and take a walk this morning? You'd just love it!"

Miss Emeline regarded her young guest with a perfectly scandalized gaze. "Go to walk in the middle of the morning!" she exclaimed. "Leave your house to go to rack and ruin while you was out gallivanting of a *morning!* Why, Ma would turn in her grave at the very idea!"

"Do you believe she'd really care—now she's up in Heaven?" inquired Mary Christie with ready interest. "They must have heaps of time to go walking themselves, I should think, considering they don't have to sweep and dust and things like that. What do you suppose they do with all their spare time, Miss Emeline?"

"When I was a child," replied Miss Emeline

decisively, "I wa'n't never allowed to talk about matters that didn't no ways concern me, like Heaven and such!"

Mary Christie looked startled. "Oh, don't you think they do?" she inquired. "Why, I'm awfully interested about Heaven myself. We all are up at our house. One night we planned just the kind of mansion we want for our family,—something like Mount Vernon it was—and I'm going to ask the Lord to let me have pink wings and Sally wants pale blue ones—I think violet ones would be very becoming to you, Miss Emeline. Don't you, Miss Emily?"

"For the land sakes alive and Goshen!" ejaculated Miss Emeline, lifting her hands, knife and all, in pious horror. "Where do you ever expect you'll go to, talking like that?—Pink wings and violet!—Well, all I can say is I am glad and thankful old Gran'ther Parlow can't hear ye!"

"Would it shock him awfully, do you think?" asked Mary confidentially. "It did Uncle Lem, I know, when we first came to live with him, but now he doesn't mind it at all."

Miss Emeline shook her head portentously. "Well, it beats my time," she declared, "but I s'pose things has got to be overlooked—you being a missionary family so, and not used to the ways of Christian lands. Only for the mercy's sake, Em'ly, be you going to spring this free and easy

kind of talk on me too—just because you're a missionary from Chiny ? "

Miss Emily Parlow laughed softly. "I'll try not to shock you, Aunt Emeline," she said. "In the matter of wings at least I can safely promise not to be so enterprising as Mary and Sally," she smiled brightly at the little visitor, "but as to the missionary part, yes, I suppose that has a good deal to do with it. We'd never have the courage to go out there and live, I imagine, in India and China and all those far-away places if Heaven didn't seem just as real, and, many times, more near than they do ! "

"For the land sakes," ejaculated Miss Emeline again helplessly, "for the land of mercy's sakes ! " She stared at her two guests, and then recovering herself, she added crisply :—"Well, at any rate, I hope you don't think 'tis equally full of poor senseless heathen bowing down to wood and stone; though the land only knows—what idees you two have got between you." With a little shake of her head she began to slice her turnips into the bowl of fresh water which was awaiting them, and decisively brought back the conversation to more familiar paths by inquiring, "And how's your ma this morning, Mary Christie ? Worn to skin and bones I s'pose nursing that mess of children with measles. How soon will they be out now ? "

"Not till next week, poor dears," returned Mary

in a maternal tone which was decidedly amusing to at least one of her hearers; then suddenly relapsing into her natural manner: "Oh, goodness me," she cried, "that reminds me of my errand. Mother sent me over to say that of course she wouldn't be able to have the missionary meeting on Friday and so she wanted to know if you wouldn't, Miss Emeline, and have Miss Emily speak."

Miss Emeline cast a fiercely protective glance at the younger Miss Parlow. "She ain't well enough," she declared sharply. "She ain't strong enough to do anything extry, and I ain't a-going to have her over-tire herself ——"

But Miss Emily was laying a gentle hand on her arm. "You're so good to me, dear Aunt Emeline," she murmured, "but really I'd love to do it. I feel quite like myself again now, after nearly a month of your beautiful care, and right here at home like this it wouldn't be hard at all."

"Here at home!" repeated Miss Emeline. "Here at home! Do you think for one minute ——? Why, Emily Parlow, this house has never been opened for a missionary meeting in the world. Our folks haven't never held with missions. Ma always said 'charity begins at home,' and as for Gran'ther Parlow he said if the Lord made heathen without any sense, why He wanted 'em to stay so. I believe he'd rise right up out of his grave if he thought folks was showing off

Chinese idols and such on our parlor center-table."

"Supposing I promise not to show a single idol, dear Aunt Emeline," coaxed Miss Emily prettily. "Supposing I just show a few trinkets and talk about my dear people? The Chinese really, you know ——"

"Dear people!" cut in Miss Emeline, unceremoniously. "Dear people! Yellow-faced and slant-eyed and no more sense 'n a cat!" Then with a grim smile that would steal across her face in spite of her, she added, "Oh, well, go ahead and have it your own way, you and Mary Christie. She always does manage to work it some way, and you seem to be cut off the same piece of cloth with her. Go ahead and speak if you're so set on it, but not in this house, no siree. The whole kit and caboodle of our relation would rise right up out of their graves if I let you do that. 'Twould be a real disrespect to their memories, Emily Parlow!"

"And of course I wouldn't do that for anything," returned her guest promptly. "And it's awfully nice of you not to mind my speaking when you feel that way. But you will go with me, won't you, Aunt Emeline? I hate to go all alone by myself in a strange place!"

Miss Emeline turned away her head to hide the sudden softening of her sharp old eyes. "Wal, we'll see," she conceded non-committally. "I

dunno how 'twill be exactly. But anyway I guess you'll have company enough of folks that thinks it's a 'duty.' Though what earthly good anybody thinks 'twill do a lot of Christian people to hear about these heathen Chinee that wasn't born with any more sense than to *be* heathen, I dunno. If they had some reasonable religion now, even if 'twa'n't right, I'd have more patience with 'em."

Without noticing the slow smile which was spreading over Miss Emily's features, she turned suddenly to her younger guest. "Here, Mary Christie, you take this saucepan and hang it up on that nail over there. Mercy no, child, not that one! That's where Great-Aunt Betsey's spider belongs. She hung it on that nail on the very day of her death. It's out now on the door-step, airing from the onions we had yesterday. You can pop out and get that too, but I'll hang it up myself. Things in this house have had their places for years and years and I don't want nobody upsetting 'em."

Mary Christie sprang to obey. "Here it is," she cried, with her cheery little laugh as she "popped" back again. "From the very farthest end of the long milk-pan shelf by the door. I suppose somebody must have found out the most convenient place for everything years ago, so of course it's the wisest thing to leave them there. Mother says her grandmother used to say 'make your head save your heels,' and it's worked out just like

'Efficiency' does now, so she doesn't change things unless she's sure she can improve them.

"Good-bye for a while; I'm going up to Mrs. Ellwood's now to ask her. Mother said to try her next if you didn't find it quite convenient. I'll come in on the way back and let you know." And off she skipped like an active little robin redbreast.

"Mary Christie is certainly the dearest child!" exclaimed Miss Emily warmly as she turned from the window through which she had waved a second farewell. "Don't you just love her?"

But Miss Emeline did not hear. With Great-Aunt Betsey's spider still in her hand, she was surveying the rows of nails from which her kitchen utensils hung. Over there by the sink was the one for the griddle-cake turner—"Ma's" chosen place from which it must never be absent; underneath the clock belonged the dish-pan—Aunt Bethia had kept it there; on the inside of the sink-door hung the stove-poker; Aunt Cely, being "pison-neat," had wanted it hidden out of sight. In the pantry, she knew, her every-day plates were on the far end of a rather high shelf—because that place had happened to be the only vacant one when Gran'ther Parlow brought them home and "landed" them there forty years ago.

"I *like* the places where my things are kept," announced Miss Parlow defiantly as she turned.

"The places that my folks chose is good enough for me; and I'm not going to change 'em to suit any newfangled ideas that uneasy folks has fudged up and put in the papers just for the sake of having things different."

"No indeed," agreed Miss Emily with ready tact. "Really it would be a waste of time, I'm sure. Having been used to these places all your life, you'd find it lots more trouble to remember new ones than it would be to take the extra steps."

But Miss Emeline was not amenable to tact. "Wal, I dunno about that, either," she retorted crisply. "My memory ain't failing any as I know of. I guess I remembered where Habakkuk was last night, Em'ly, enough sight better'n you did. Only when your folks have fixed things a good way, you'd better let well enough alone, that's all." She ended the subject like a seam, with a decisive snap of her lips.

"And now I want you to think back, Em'ly, and see if you can't remember something about that great-grandfather of yours that you think was named John. I believe in my bones that he was really my grandfather's Cousin John from Hingham."

The climbing of family trees was always a favorite exercise of Miss Emeline's, and with the hope of finding a real relationship between herself and her namesake guest, she was scaling with even

more than her usual ardor, when the bright face of Mary Christie peeped again around the door-frame.

"It's all right," she cried happily. "Mrs. Ellwood is awfully glad to have the meeting, so everything turned out for the best. And she does hope and pray it'll be a good big meeting, and she sends a special invitation for you to come, Miss Emeline."

"Me?" demanded Miss Emeline. "Me? With my niece speaking? Well, you just go back and tell Abby Ellwood that of course I'm coming to that meeting, but I don't have to be beholden to her, thank goodness, for my invitation."

At sight of the consternation in Mary Christie's face she stopped abruptly. "Now there I go again," she cried. "I do hope the Lord'll see His way to forgiving me for my sharp tongue. When you've been a-filing of it off for a matter of sixty years it gets quite an edge; and Abby Ellwood always did stroke me the wrong way.

"You needn't say a word to her, though, child, nor to anybody else. It's a secret, mind you. Folks do love something to talk about, so we'll let 'em chew over that for a while. It'll whip up their circulations running back and forth and putting their heads together."

VI

"POOR BENIGHTED HEATHEN"

THE matter did indeed excite the interest which Miss Emeline had predicted. For so many years she had lived absolutely to herself in her old white house that the recent developments there had made her quite the center of village interest. That she should open her doors to a missionary and a stranger, who had also proved to be an unknown niece, was sufficiently startling; would she now so far cast aside her hereditary dislike for missions and her long-standing quarrel with Abby Ellwood, as to escort her guest to a missionary meeting in Mrs. Ellwood's home?

The white-picket gate in the old Parlow fence did not yet swing very easily upon its hinges, but a few of the bolder or kindlier neighbors dropped in with a hinted question at the end of their call on the missionary, and were forced to go away no wiser than they came. Mrs. Ellwood even went to the extent of repeating her invitation on the way home from the village one evening, but though Miss Emeline responded crisply—"Thank you, Abby, very kindly. I hope the day'll be pleasant,"

and felt, as she said afterward, "as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth," Mrs. Ellwood herself was far from certain of the outcome.

It was therefore with feelings of the liveliest satisfaction that she opened her door for the first comers to the missionary meeting and found them to be the two "Miss Parlows," as Jane Austen says.

"How nice of you to be the first ones," she beamed hospitably, as she superintended the removal of their wraps in the little "parlor bedroom." "Now I can give you the two best seats, as is befitting, instead of having the Smith young ones plump down into 'em as they usually do. You take that rocker right over there in the corner, Emeline. It was Grandmother Paine's old haircloth, you remember, but I had it done over in this new tapestry last winter, and now I take clear comfort with it. Don't you call it handsome? I'm going to have the sofy done over too as soon as I can afford it. Haircloth always looked too much like a funeral for me."

"Haircloth was good enough for ——" began Miss Emeline with such grim disapproval written on every feature that for once Miss Emily disregarded the laws of politeness.

"It's lovely, Mrs. Ellwood," she exclaimed cordially, "one of the prettiest patterns of tapestry I've ever seen, and it goes beautifully with the old mahogany, doesn't it? I wish we could get

some just like it for Grandfather Parlow's arm-chair ——"

But smiling Mrs. Ellwood, with a hasty excuse, was returning to the front door to welcome the second installment of guests.

"What was good enough for your grandfather is good enough for you, Em'ly," began Miss Emeline reprovingly, and then her thin lips relaxed into a grim smile.

"Yes, she's here," came Mrs. Ellwood's capacious whisper from the hall. "Setting right in my new rocker this minute. And her niece too, as she calls ——"

Miss Emeline, like the war-horse that scents powder, rose joyfully to the occasion.

"Yes, I'm here, Mandy Blodgett," she announced distinctly as that lady entered the room in transit. "You couldn't expect me to desert my niece, could you, in a dangerous spot like a missionary meeting? Make you 'quainted with my niece, Miss Emily Parlow, Mis' Blodgett." Though there might be some lingering doubts within the Parlow homestead of the identity of Emily's great-grandfather and that wandering Cousin John who went to California in the 40's, no hint of them was allowed to be breathed outside.

From that moment Miss Emeline dominated the occasion. Upon her, as she knew, fell the first glance of curiosity and interest from each new-

comer. About her they were talking as they stood whispering in hall or bedroom. From her eyes darted the righteous glare of indignation which scorched any one who dared as much as to rustle a hymn-book after Miss Emily had begun to talk. Verily Miss Emeline was cut out to be a social dictator.

She herself, however, listened only spasmodically to the speeeh, so absorbed was she in watching the faces of those around her, in order to be sure that they were drinking in this message from foreign lands with proper appreciation and attention. And never had she come nearer to the sins of pride and vainglory than she did when the "Elder" himself wiped away a tear after one of Miss Emily's simple stories; and, as to glances, "with intent to kill," what about the one which she launched at poor old Aunt Hetty Parsons when that gentle soul followed her time-honored custom of taking a peaceful little nap "in meetin'-time"? Suddenly, however, her own wandering attention was chained by Miss Emily's clear tones.

"But in spite of these other forms of religion," she was saying, "Confucianism and Buddhism, of which I have just told you, the worship of ancestors is the leading factor in China's religious life. Always when he tries to progress, the ancestors of the Chinaman hold back his steps with their dead hands. When a great new truth comes

to him, he looks at it first with eyes that have not seen the light of earth for hundreds of years. 'Why must you do that or think that?' we say to our people, and they answer, 'Because our ancestors did. That is reason enough for us.'" She went on to illustrate humorously in some little every-day matters, while a murmur of amusement ran around the room.

But Miss Emeline did not join in the laugh. Indeed she did not even hear that flattering tribute to Miss Emily's eloquence.

"Because our ancestors did. That is reason enough for us," repeated an inner voice, and with the uncompromising honesty which distinguished her, Miss Emeline was looking herself and her ways of living squarely in the face.

Why had she hung that poker on the inside of the sink door—where it clattered unpleasantly every time the door was opened? Because Aunt Cely did—no getting around that!

Why did she continue to plant carrots in the one end of her little garden, though she herself had always disliked them? Because Aunt Bethia believed that every self-respecting citizen ought to "lay down" carrots for the winter.

Why had she scoffed at Abby Ellwood's new chair-covering—though she herself had hated haircloth, "inside," ever since the day, fifty-odd years ago now when she had tried to find comfort for an

aching tooth on the slippery haircloth of the parlor sofa, and had fallen cruelly to the floor. Why had she refused to have that missionary meeting at her house? Not surely because she herself hated missionaries and their works so obdurately—the presence of the guest already so warmly loved proved that. No, it was because "Gran'ther" and "Ma" had taught her the foolishness of wasting your time and money on the far-away heathen when so many sensible Christian folks ——

"Sensible Christian folks!" and here was she, their own daughter and granddaughter, no better than a heathen Chinee in some ways in spite of sixty sensible years in this Christian land! Well, praise be, she'd got a missionary of her own now, anyway, one well practised on the Chinese themselves and so just cut out to fit the case. With a grim chuckle appreciative of the humor of the situation, Miss Emeline came back to the present.

Evidently the main part of the meeting was over, for Miss Emily had sat down and the president, Mrs. Blodgett, was now speaking.

"At the next meeting," she was announcing pleasantly, "Miss Parlow has promised to tell us a great deal more about life in China, and to bring a lot more curios, so I hope some lady with larger parlors will offer them, for I'm sure that there'll be a big turn-out, after we carry the news."

"The Christie children will probably be well by

then," volunteered a voice, "so I guess we can have it there. Lem Perkins's rooms is big enough for a town-meeting."

"Oh, yes," cried Mary Christie, popping up from the corner behind Miss Emeline's chair, "I'm sure Mother ——"

"You wait now, Mary Christie," commanded Miss Emeline's crisp voice. "Don't be too brash now about offering when you may come down with the measles yourself yet. Em'ly and me," she continued, raising her voice, "will have that meeting over to our house, of course. It's big enough for as much of a crowd as you'll get together, I guess; and Em'ly can't go lugging her things all over town, a-breaking half of 'em likely; and anyhow scattering of 'em from Dan to Beersheba. And it'll be a special silver offering too, for the benefit of the heathen Chinee—those in furrin lands!"

Mary Christie, in the proud position of robe-bearer to a gorgeous mandarin robe stiff with embroidery, escorted the Parlow ladies to their door.

"Oh, Miss Emeline," she cried joyfully as they entered the spotless kitchen, "I know now what you make me think of—the man in the Bible that said, 'I go not, sir,' but he went. You always do nice things even when you say you won't. Did you ever notice that before?"

But Miss Emeline's brisk step was already cross-

ing the kitchen floor. With one swift motion she had retrieved the swinging poker from the sink-door and laid it on the end of the stove.

"You go out to the wood-shed, Mary Christie," she commanded, "and bring me in the basket of nails and hammer—I'm going to keep it in the cupboard after this where 'twill be handy whenever I want to drive in a nail where nobody never thought of putting one before. Whatever I have acted like in the past, I'm going to quit being a poor senseless heathen Chinee from now on. Land knows I thought I knew all there was *to* know about kith and kin, and your own folks, but seems the Lord had to send me a missionary from furrin parts to finish up the job. I guess He thinks I ain't too old a dog to learn new tricks anyhow."

VII

MISS EMELINE GOES BORROWING

CHRISTMAS had come and gone—a Christmas which would undoubtedly have made some of the more Puritanic of Miss Emeline's ancestors turn in their graves, as that lady expressed it—January too was almost past, but still Emily stayed on in the old Parlow house. In fact her polite suggestion that she ought not to trespass on its hospitality too far had been received with an indignation so fierce that it was really amusing.

"For the mercy's sake, Em'ly Parlow!" Miss Emeline had snapped. "Trespass! What you talking about? If staying with your own folks—the only kith and kin you've got in the world is trespassing then I guess I'd better go to school and learn my spelling and definition over again! Trespassin'! Humph!"

And Emily, rejoicing in this acceptance of her into full niece-hood, had hidden her smile by planting a warm kiss upon the withered cheek which pretended to draw away—and said no more. "But, oh, I hope that some time I can return some of her heavenly kindness to me!" she whispered to herself later, as she looked around her quaint little

bedroom with happy tears in her eyes, realizing that at last she might dare to call it Home. "She has given me so much. Someway I must give a little back!"

And with this thought in mind she almost welcomed Miss Emeline's annual bout of neuralgia when it made its appearance one Sunday morning.

But she who expects to return favors pro rata to an independent New Englander has many things yet to learn.

"Not going to meetin' this mornin'?" demanded Miss Emeline when she heard that Emily too was intending to stay at home. "Why not, I'd like to know? All the more reason you should go and represent the family if I stay at home, miss. Go put on your hat and flax along. You'll be late if you don't look out."

She was sitting bolt upright in her splint-bottomed rocker before the shining "cook-stove." Her feet were resting symmetrically on the edge of its opened oven, and her head was sewed up in red flannel, but her tones were not to be gainsaid. Emily vanished obediently, to return in church attire.

"But dear Aunt Emeline," she protested affectionately, "I do hate to go off to church and leave you when you're not feeling well. Are you sure you wouldn't like me to stay at home and take care of you? I'd be *so* glad to, you know."

Miss Emeline laid down the Farmers' Almanac which she was perusing and fixed her snapping black eyes upon her niece. "Take care of me!" she repeated crisply. "For the land o' mercy's sake, Em'ly Parlow! If I ain't old enough to take care of myself by now, I guess I ain't never going to be. I s'pose likely you think I'm staying home from meeting to-day just because I've got neurolgy in my jaw. Not by a long chalk, I ain't——" She chuckled in quiet appreciation of her own humor. "It's just because I'm getting so almighty vain in my old age. You wouldn't think anybody'd be so fussy, o' course; but someway I can't seem to relish the idee of my setting there in the face and eyes of Oatka Centre with my Sunday-go-to-meeting bunnet perched on top of this red flannel bandage I've got sewed around my jaw."

Emily Parlow laughed merrily. "It would be rather striking, Aunt Emeline," she said, "and might distract people's attention a little from the sermon too, I'm afraid. But in spite of your jokes, I'm sure you don't feel well enough to be left alone. Your face aches dreadfully; now doesn't it? At any rate you must promise me that you won't do one thing about dinner. I'll come home before Sunday School and get it."

"You shoo along now and don't you dare come home till Sunday School's done," commanded Miss Emeline, accompanying her remark with a per-

emptory flirt of her Farmers' Almanac. "Chiny may be a good place to learn how to cook rice in, but when it comes to Christian victuals like ham and eggs, I guess sixty years of Oatka Centre ain't to be sneezed it."

"Indeed they're not," agreed Emily cordially; "nobody ever fried eggs as well as you do, I'm sure. But you won't cook them to-day just on my account, will you, Aunt Emeline? The ham alone ——"

"I cook 'em," retorted Miss Emeline, "because the Lord intended 'em to go together, miss. Now you flax along and don't disgrace the family by being late to meeting." The warm light in her black eyes belied the brusqueness of her words as Emily disappeared abruptly with a laughing pretense of fright and haste.

"That child!" she murmured to herself in a softened tone as the door closed, "wants to keep me done up in cotton batting as careful as if I was a doll-baby. Wouldn't she be all struck in a heap now if she remembered that she forgot all about gathering the eggs this morning; and the last ones in the house carried to the store yesterday. I guess I'd better get along out to the hen-house right away or she may come back and catch me."

Whether it was her unseemly haste that was to blame, or the mummifying effects of "Ma's punkinhood" over the red flannel bandage, or just an

extra twinge of the fiend, "Neurolgy," Miss Emeline never could decide. All she ever could tell was that for some unknown reason she had stumbled suddenly just after she left the hen-house steps, and that she had saved herself by a swift instinctive outflinging of both arms, quite unmindful of the fact that a baker's dozen of new-laid eggs were cradled in the improvised basket formed by her upturned blue gingham apron.

Lifting her skirts gingerly above her impromptu omelette, Miss Emeline stood and surveyed the result of her disaster with an expression of the deepest disgust.

"Well, you certainly are a pretty one, Emeline Parlow," she remarked scathingly. "Thought you said you was old enough to take care of yourself; and here you be—can't even go out to the hen-house without falling over a blade of dead grass and throwing a dozen good eggs to Ballyhack. Didn't your ma never train you to lift your feet?"

As no audible response issued from her abject second self, which was evidently as badly crushed as the eggs themselves, Miss Emeline returned to the charge.

"Of course 'tain't no more use to cry over broken eggs than 'tis over spilled milk, I s'pose; but what do you think you're going to do about Em'ly's dinner, I'd like to inquire? Ham and fried eggs you promised her. You'd look pretty, wouldn't

you, when she comes home from Sunday School so hungry she could eat a woodchuck, and with her mouth all made up for a mess of my fried eggs, telling her to go out in the back yard and scoop 'em up off the ground! And it's Sunday and the store not open! What in the name of Time and the Primer —— ?"

With baffled eyes, Miss Emeline swept the icy landscape vainly for light. Not until she had closed her back door and entered her own warm and cozy kitchen did any illumination come. Then —

"Why, yes," gasped Miss Emeline suddenly, staggered by the cataclysmic idea which presented itself. "I s'pose I might—I dunno what Ma or the rest of 'em would say—I wa'n't never brought up to—and of course 'twould open the way—but I can't have that child disappointed! I guess just for once I'll have to—yes, I *will*—borrow!" And Miss Emeline put down her foot with the emphasis of a Cæsar deciding to cross the Rubicon.

It was indeed in its smaller way a replica of that famous step. "A Parlow must neither borrow nor lend" had been dinned into her ears from her babyhood up. Not until recently had a neighbor on any errand been made to feel welcome in her spotless little kitchen, nor had she gone into theirs. "Let families keep to themselves and away from other folks and they'll save themselves lots of

trouble" had been her mother's preachment. And by that preachment she had faithfully lived until that happy day when Emily had crossed the threshold of the old Parlow house and of its mistress' frozen old heart.

But once Miss Emeline had decided, there was, as she graphically remarked, "no shilly-shally" about her. With swift steps she crossed the kitchen, topped the little purple shawl which had covered her shoulders with a thicker one of black and white which she pinned tightly with a pair of old green shawl pins, linked together by a rusty steel chain, and possessed herself of a small round splint basket from behind the pantry door.

"More fool you, not to have carried it out to the hen-house," she commented crisply, "then you wouldn't have kicked up all this bobbery."

Down at the front gate she paused. "Now where'm I going to borrow?" she inquired, looking capably up and down the road. "Lem Perkinses' folks all gone to meeting, of course—the Christie young ones being over the measles." She turned her head. "No smoke at all from Abby Ellwood's chimney—she's over to her daughter's again this week, and I wouldn't go there anyhow; Deacon Blodgett's folks —— Well there, Emeline Parlow, you certainly are in your second childhood—twice in one morning you've proved it. O' course all respectable folks are down at the meetin'-house.

Now that we've got so many ex-missionaries let loose in Oatka Centre, everybody's turning out to be such pillars that you have to tie 'em up in red flannel to keep 'em to home." She chuckled humorously. "Well, I s'pose I'll just have to wait and spoil Em'ly's good bringing-up by sending her over to Mis' Christie's when she gets home."

But as she turned to go back to the house, her keen eye caught sight of just the faintest wisp of smoke rising on the clear air above the snow-laden branches of her own wood-lot.

"The very thing," ejaculated Miss Emeline swiftly. "I heard tell some of those Eyetalians had stayed over from cranberry-picking and was still living in that old barn on Roweny's pasture. Ma'd say I'd put myself on the level of shiftless furriners by borrowing anyway—so I might just as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb and go the whole figger and borrow from them. 'Course it don't seem real appetizing, as you might say; but there, they can't put their fingers in eggs nor give 'em no disease as I can see, so I'll chance it."

And with a sudden right-about-face, Miss Emeline snapped her little white gate shut behind her, followed the length of her own picket-fence, and then turned briskly down the long lane which led to the Parlow wood-lot; and so, through a "pair of bars" to "Roweny's pasture."

It was just as she was letting down these bars

that she noticed for the first time a man who was running across the pasture toward her, gesticulating wildly with his waving arms.

"Running out to scare me off, I s'pose," she commented grimly. "Just like them impident furriners, trying to drive out the Americans that was born and brought up here. Well, you can't scare me away, mister, and you needn't think it."

And with the undaunted mien of Minerva herself, Miss Emeline stepped through the bars, dropped them back into place and advanced intrepidly to meet the man who was still running and waving.

"Oh, signora," he called, as he came within hailing distance. "Signora, kind-a signora!"

"For the land sakes," ejaculated Miss Emeline, stopping abruptly, "are you trying to say singer? Because if you are, you've come to the wrong wood-pile, young man. I'm free to confess that I don't know what concern 'tis of yourn, but I ain't a singer—not even a kind of a singer, if that's what you mean. I can't carry a tune any better'n you could carry a ton of bricks from here to the village."

With a swift, ingratiating smile, the little man changed his form of address. "Oh, ladee," he cried instead, "kind-a ladee, oh, vieni, come-a, come-a, Margarita so seeck—so seeck!"

But Miss Emeline stood unmoved before this out-

burst. To her New England temperament, his eager gestures, his eloquent, flexible voice, the very tones of that voice betrayed an indecent lack of self-control. She made no effort to understand. Why should she? Instead she seized coldly upon the one word which sounded familiar and answered that.

"Seek? Seek?" she repeated crisply. "Mercy sakes alive, do you think I'm trespassing? I guess I picked blueberries all over Roweny's pasture long before you were ever born or thought of. I *seek* some eggs, if that's what you want to know. Eggs!—Hens!—Chickens!" She ended in a loud staccato, extending her basket suggestively in front of her, "Has—your—wife—got—any—to—spare?"

The little Italian, in turn, grasped at one saving word lost hitherto in his excitement. "Si, si!" he cried. "Wife—wife—Margarita—so seeck, so seeck!" His whole lithe body drooped in an abandonment expressive of such utter physical wretchedness that his meaning pierced even the armor of Miss Emeline's race-intolerance. Of course it was the height of stupidity for any man to be born in a land where the English language is not spoken, but still if he was not trying to drive her away, and really was in trouble, that altered matters a little.

"Oh, your wife is sick, is she?" she inquired, more gently. "What's the matter with her?"

But the little Italian shook his head. "Seeck! Seeck!" he repeated eloquently. "Kind-a ladee come-a!" He reached out supplicating hands toward the edge of Miss Emeline's checked shawl —but desisted before an imperious wave of the empty basket.

"I won't run away," she assured him with curt kindliness. "You flax along now and tell her I'm coming.—Oh, land, I s'pose you don't understand a word I'm saying.—Go—tell—wife—I—am—coming!" She ended with a staccato shout, and an illustrative wave of the basket.

"Si, si, I go!" cried the little Italian eagerly, and with a grateful smile he turned and ran toward the ramshackle old barn which had stood for fifty years in Roweny's pasture, a silent watcher beside the charred fragments of what had once been a home.

"What a place for folks to be sick in!" commented Miss Emeline as she neared the sagging door-sill; "only of course 'tain't as if they were exactly folks. Eyetalians and Chinese and so on ain't used to much according to Em'ly's talk," she added swiftly, lumping the East and West together with a fine disregard of the thousands of miles that separated them in customs, as well as in space.

But no sooner had she climbed the two rickety boxes which served as door-steps, and entered the pitiful place, than all questions of "folks" or not

"folks" vanished before a wave of very human pity and sympathy. One corner of the barren interior had been screened off with some worn lengths of sail-cloth, and a few miserable pieces of furniture collected to form a semblance of a human habitation. A cracked and smoking stove struggled against the icy air which forced its way through the wide crevices in the outer walls. Close beside it, on a wretched bed of sacking stuffed with leaves, lay a little black-haired creature, flushed and moaning.

"Margarita, Margarita," cried the man anxiously, and as she opened her eyes he poured forth a torrent of eager Italian. It was evidently something about their guest; and a look of real mother-kindliness transfigured Miss Emeline's grim old face, as the little Margarita looked up at her and obediently attempted a pitiful smile of welcome.

"You poor little thing," she murmured, laying her hand gently upon the burning forehead. "You poor sick little thing!" and her keen eyes clouded with a sudden mist.

"So seeck, Margarita, so seeck?" queried the little man, gazing at Miss Emeline with anxious liquid eyes. "What to do, eh? So seeck!"

"Burning up with fever," agreed Miss Emeline with a thoughtful nod, "and she's got a cough that sounds —— Do you know whether she's ever had measles?" she demanded suddenly. "Has her

face been broken out? Looks as if it had and they'd gone in.—Oh, land, I s'pose you don't understand more'n two words I say, so I'll have to choose 'em careful. Get me a pail of water—*water*—first. Oh, you've got some right there. That's good. Now I'll heat that up on the stove while you"—she laid her hand on his arm and raised her voice authoritatively, "run for the *doctor—doctor—doctor*—as tight as you can lick it! Understand? He's to *meetin'—meetin'*."

"Si, si," he echoed eagerly, "I go, I ron—see?" He moved to free himself from the grasp, which Miss Emeline merely tightened.

"Tell him—*Emeline Parlow*," she ejaculated, "*Emeline Parlow*, understand?"

"Si, si; I—Tony, Tony Garotti," he answered brightly, "Emelina Parlowa—yes, I go."

"No, you don't," contradicted Miss Emeline, gripping tighter, "not till you say it after me; Emeline Parlow says come quick!"

"Emelina—Parlowa say—come—queeck!" repeated Tony obediently, and then again and yet again before Miss Emeline dispatched him, satisfied.

"That'll fetch him on the dead run," commented Miss Emeline as she turned back toward her patient. "Eben Slocum knows I don't say quick unless it means quick—that's one thing. And it looks like quick to me, the way that sick little critter is burning up in this ice-chest. I don't

scarcely dare to touch her for fear I'll do the wrong thing, but I guess it's safe to heat water and try to stop up a few chinks and straighten things out and comfort her up a bit afore he comes ——"

Then as she stepped briskly about her self-imposed tasks, she added to herself, with her usual grim humor, "What was it Ma used to say about going out to shear and coming back shorn? She knew what she was talking about that time, Ma did, same as always. 'Twould tickle her, I expect, to see what I've got into by disobeying her in my old age and starting out to borrow—on a Sunday too! But there, I dunno as I'm sorry. Poor little creeter!"

And with the mother-kindliness again lighting her face she turned to improvise a clean and cool pillow slip from her spotless gingham apron for the feverish cheek to rest upon.

By this time Margarita had sunk into a stupor and Miss Emeline shook her head anxiously as she tiptoed away to the doorway to watch for the doctor's coming.

"Thank the good Lord here they be!" she cried fervently, catching sight of the doctor's old sleigh just turning through the opening between her wood-lot and the pasture. "Tony must have found him down to the meetin'-house just as I said. Even though I don't give shucks for a doctor my-

self, it's an awful relief someway when they come." She smiled humorously at herself, as she said it. Not the least of Miss Emeline's good points was a hearty appreciation of a joke on herself. But both the smile and the relief faded before the serious expression of the doctor's face, as he examined his patient.

"You diagnosed the case just right, Emeline," he said gravely; "a bad case of measles complicated by a severe chill. By what I can get out of Tony she must have been breaking out yesterday. And this is the worst possible place for her. She can't possibly get well in this barracks. I don't know what in thunder ——"

"No, no, no! No, no, no!" cried an anguished voice at his side, and little Tony with all the passion of his race flung himself at the big doctor's feet. "Margarita no die! No, no, no! No, no, no!" He plunged into a torrent of supplication in his native tongue, embracing impartially the doctor's knees and Miss Emeline's arctic-shod feet.

"There, there, there," soothed the doctor uncomfortably. "Who in tunket would have thought he could understand what I was saying, Emeline? Land knows I'll save her for ye if I can, sonny," he bestowed an awkward pat on the bowed shoulders, "but she's got to be kept warm and—she couldn't even be carried very far. If Mrs. Christie hadn't just been through such a siege ——"

"Would it be safe for her to be carried at all?" demanded Miss Emeline with a curtness which she devoutly hoped would cover an unwonted quiver in her crisp voice.

"Why, yes—a little ways if she were wrapped up very warm. 'Tain't so awful much colder outside than 'tis in here."

"All right then, but be sure you wrap her up good," commanded Miss Emeline unexpectedly. "I'll put this water I've het up in an old tin can I saw out there and you can put it at her feet; but I guess you and Tony'll have to manage the moving without me. You take this shawl"—she deftly removed the two green pins and flung the checked shawl on the bed, "I shan't miss it none. I'll have to flax around so spry if I'm going to have the bed ready and the room het good and hot by the time she gets there."

"Where-a she go?" demanded Tony anxiously as Miss Emeline disappeared around the sail-cloth curtains in search of the tin can.

Gently and simply the old doctor explained that she was getting ready to take Margarita home with her—to get well.

"Get-a well-a?" repeated the little Italian fervently, with the tears running down his boyish face. "Margarita no die—eh?" His anguished eyes searched the older man's face.

"God willing—no!" vowed the doctor warmly.

"And if He can make over Emeline Parlow like that ——"

But Tony did not hear him. Miss Emeline had returned and with a sudden motion he had flung himself at her feet and was kissing the hem of her black alpaca skirt. Upon the torrent of his grateful Italian one phrase again soared high.

"He's calling you an angel, Emeline," explained the doctor with a moved smile. "An angel of God, he says."

"Land sakes alive," cried Miss Emeline, with a break in her crisp voice, "don't he know any better than to think that angels go around in arctics and gingham aprons with their jaws tied up in red flannel?"

Then her Down-East humor came to the rescue of her shaken nerves. "You tell him, Eben Slocum, that it's just that I'm so set on borrowing. Once I let myself loose nothing could stop me. If they'd had any eggs I'd 'a' borrowed them, but seein's they didn't, I'm going to borrow a good case of measles to take home to Em'ly—poor lamb."

VIII

"FURRINERS LIKE THAT"

"HERE I am, Aunt Emeline," called Emily Parlow cheerfully, as she opened the red-painted back door and stepped into the immaculate little kitchen. "You see I obeyed you after all and stayed to Sunday School, though I felt all the time that I oughtn't. I do hope that old neuralgia of yours ——" She stopped with the words dying on her lips, blinked and stared incredulously at the sight which unfolded before her snow-dazzled eyes.

When she had left home, three hours before, Miss Emeline Parlow had sat before the shining cook-stove in her little splint-bottomed rocker. In spite of the formality of her second-best alpaca and Sunday shoulder-shawl, she had been a rather humorous figure, for her long thin face was closely swathed in red flannel; and she was mocking stoically at the twinges of "neurolgy-in-the-jaw."

Now that same splint-bottomed rocker was occupied by a small untidy-looking man. He was leaning over on Miss Emeline's spotless red table cover,

with his black head cushioned on his arms like a child, and was sobbing weakly.

As Emily ceased speaking he jumped to his feet, and burst into a torrent of broken English. In her dazed condition she caught only the repeated word: "Margarita" and his liquid use of vowels. Evidently the little man was an Italian. Then she noticed that the tears which still coursed from his large dark eyes made dirty little rivers down his swarthy cheeks.

And the two things in life which her Aunt Emeline apparently most detested were dirt and "furriners"—particularly those "furriners" whose easy display of emotion offended her native New England reserve. And here in Miss Emeline's neat New England kitchen this very untidy-looking little foreigner sat and wept out his griefs on her immaculate red-fringed table cover! What in the world could it mean?

"Why—why"— she stammered, shaken for once out of her usual poise, "I—er—isn't Miss Emeline ——"

The sound of a grim chuckle from the sitting-room door drew her eyes in that direction. There stood Miss Emeline herself, still swathed in red flannel—but with shawl cast aside and a capable-looking blue and white gingham apron girdling her black alpaca waist.

"Didn't expect to find a surprise party a-waitin'

for you when you came home from meetin', did you, Em'ly ?" she inquired. Suddenly a swift note of comic alarm sharpened her voice. "Land sakes alive and Goshen, take him away, somebody! Do!" she cried. "Shoo-oo!" She waved a saucepan which she was carrying in her right hand as if she were driving off a persistent chicken.

For the little Italian, hearing her voice, had turned and run swiftly to her side with a childlike smile shining through his tears. And now, on his knees at her feet, he was pressing his lips to the hem of the gingham apron, while he sobbed out broken words of gratitude.

At the sight of her niece's face, however, Miss Emeline recovered herself. "Another surprise party, eh, Em'ly ?" she inquired. "Didn't know there was anybody so blind that he'd think I was an angel, did you ? Well, no more did I, nor anybody else, for that matter.

"You hop up now, Tony, and let the lady see who 'tis that's so fooled." The kindly note of her voice robbed the works of any sting.

"That's right now. Make you 'quainted with Mr. Tony Garotti, Em'ly.

"This is my niece Em'ly Parlow and she's enough sight nearer bein' an angel than I be ——"

Again her voice changed, dropping its humorous tone for one of anxiety. "Have you ever had

measles, Em'ly? B'cause if you haven't, you'll have to pack right over to Mis' Christie's and visit her for a spell. Or else go up into the shed chamber to live."

Emily's lips twitched amusedly. "Fortunately," she said, "I had a fine, thorough case of measles less than ten years ago, so I don't have to be packed off to the Christies. But of course I can go up into the shed chamber if you like. Only, my dear Aunt Emeline, do you really mind explaining a little of all this? Did your neuralgia suddenly develop into measles?"

"No," retorted Miss Emeline crisply, "though I dunno but I wish it would. Be a change of aches anyway. It's Tony's wife, Margarita, that's got the measles. He and she have been a-livin' in that old barn in Roweny's pastur', it seems. I went over this morning to borrow a few eggs, and seein' as Margarita's measles was pretty bad—though not dangerous"—she nodded reassuringly at Tony—"I fetched her home with me. She's in bed in my bedroom now."

Miss Emeline spoke as coolly as if all of her statements were not positively cataclysmic in their nature—the fact that she should borrow from any one or visit these poor Italians at all being scarcely less remarkable than that an unknown "Margarita" was now having measles in Miss Emeline's own bed.

But Emily, now that the first shock was over, could be as cool as she.

"To be sure," she agreed calmly. "But why didn't you put her in my bed, Aunt Emeline? My room is larger."

Miss Emeline gave another regal wave of her saucepan. "Stuff and nonsense, Em'ly!" she cried. "Your bed indeed! These measles are my bird's-eggin', I'd have you know, miss. Didn't nobody ever teach you that 'them that dance must pay the piper'? And if I will go to dancin' horn-pipes in my old age, I hope I haven't got to the place yet where other folks have to pay my piper's bills for me. I shan't lay nowhere but on that settin'-room lounge same as I did when Ma was sick." And Miss Emeline snapped her thin lips shut with intense determination. A fine old New England sense of independence was the very back-bone of her charcter; and "never be beholden to nobody" was an essential part of her philosophy of life.

Emily smiled. She could not help thinking of the countless favors which she had received at Miss Emeline's hands for which that inconsistent lady scorned to receive any payment, but she said noth-ing. Instead she quietly obeyed a crisp command to take off her "Sunday things" and make some gruel for the sick woman while her aunt stepped briskly about the little kitchen getting the din-

ner. Tony was appointed to go and sit with his wife.

Not till her task was done did Emily enter the little bedroom which opened out of the sitting-room and look at the patient. The little Margarita was already a trifle better. She had roused from the stupor in which she had lain at first and, as Emily came in with her neat little tray of gruel and crackers, her large dark eyes turned toward the door with languid interest.

"Here is some dinner for you, Margarita," said Emily with her pleasant smile as she placed her burden upon the little light stand at the head of the bed. She drew a little rocker close at the edge of the bed, tucked a large clean napkin under Margarita's chin and prepared to feed her with the thin old silver spoon which lay beside the blue bowl.

But before the first spoonful had reached Margarita's lips, Tony sprang from the covered box at the foot of the bed where he had been crouching with watchful eyes.

"Me geeva Margarita deener," he begged, stretching out an eager hand for the spoon. "Me geeva Margarita—please-a!"

Emily rose at once. "Surely you may," she said cordially. "Sit right here. And shall I show you how? There—see ——" She guided his awkward fingers; and then as she withdrew her hand she could not refrain from a gentle pat upon the little

man's shoulder, bent forward now in quivering anxiety to do his best. His wistful dark eyes looked so like those of a faithful spaniel. "And you stay with Margarita till I come again."

With a misty backward glance she stepped out into the sitting-room, and so into the kitchen where Miss Emeline was capably "dishing up" their belated dinner.

"Wouldn't she eat?" demanded Miss Emeline, transferring a sizzling fried egg from the "spider" to its proper place on the edge of the blue and white platter. "Or did she swallow the whole tray, dishes an' all? It seems to be gone. You never left that poor weak little mite to feed herself, did you, Em'ly Parlow? I thought you had better sense."

"I have," laughed Emily, quite unruffled; "you're quite right, Aunt Emeline, but her husband wanted to feed her, you see, so I left him to do it."

"Well, what under the canopy did you do that for?" demanded Miss Emeline, pausing in the act of turning a johnny-cake, and contemplating her niece disapprovingly. "That little Eyetalian! He'll spill gruel all over the napkin and the bedspread likely and mebbe choke her to death on a cracker."

Emily laughed again. "Oh, not quite so bad as that," she said. "Maybe he'll spill, but I don't believe he'll choke her; and she's his wife and he

wanted so much to do something for her, that I couldn't refuse. Besides, Aunt Emeline, you ought to understand, if anybody does, I'm sure, that it makes him feel a little more independent, less 'beholden' as you call it, when we let him help take care of his Margarita."

Miss Emeline sniffed—"Independent!" she said. "Less beholden! Anybody'd think you was talkin' about Americans, Em'ly. Eyetalians and furriners like that don't have feelin's like us about things. You'd orter know that—a girl that's been a missionary like you."

The fact that Emily had been a missionary to the Chinese, with nothing at all to do with Italians, made no difference to Miss Emeline. To her provincial mind, "furriners" were "furriners" no matter what part of the world they came from, and as such were denizens of outer darkness.

"And who's the one that's got to do the washin'," she went on tartly, "after that 'independent' Eyetalian splashes gruel all over Grandmother Winslow's knit bed-spread?"

Suddenly she stopped short, and a wave of tender compunction swept over her keen old face. For Emily, with a hurt look in her eyes, was quietly turning back toward the sitting-room.

"There, there, Em'ly," she cried swiftly, "I'm a sharp-tongued old woman, but I don't mean nothing. So don't you take it hard now, will you, what

I said? When you've got neurolgy in your jaw, it has to *jaw* some, I presume likely, jest to remind folks it's there. That knit bed-spread needed to be washed anyhow and a slop or two more won't make no difference to it. B'sides I like to do a real good job of washing when I have one to do.

"You set right down now and eat your vittles afore they git cold. We've both got quite a spell of nursin' ahead of us and you need to keep your strength up if you're a-goin' to help me. Mebbe," she darted a tender look at Emily, "mebbe I'll go and lay down on your bed with a hot flat for a spell when we get through, while you clear away. My jaw *don't* feel quite so well as common."

It was for the strong-willed old woman a tremendous concession.

CHAPTER IX

BEHOLDEN

FORTUNATELY the neuralgia yielded swiftly—to the "hot flat" as Miss Emeline insisted with characteristic depreciation of the "doctor's mess" which Emily induced her to take when the physician came again. For, in the week that followed, there were many days and nights when neither she nor Emily needed any bed at all except the calico-covered lounge in the sitting-room. And little Tony, refusing the comforts of the shed chamber, crouched piteously in the kitchen "right under foot whichever way you step," as Miss Emeline trenchantly expressed it.

"Why don't you set him to work then, Emeline?" inquired kindly old Dr. Slocum. "He'd feel enough sight better himself, poor little feller, and not be around in your way all the time."

"Land sakes alive, Eben Slocum," flashed back Miss Emeline, "do you think I hain't tried it? That's the worst thing about him; poor little feller, he's got such an everlastin' hankerin' to help! And he ain't got any more gumption about things than the old cat's tail. The only one thing I can trust him to do is to gather hens' eggs. I set him to cut wood and he sawed it all up into

lengths too big for the stove. And then when I told him about that, he pounded all my best birch logs up into kindlin's. Why, if you'd even send him down cellar for carrots, more'n likely he'd hunt out your dahlia roots, and have 'em in the kettle before you could say Jack Robinson. Land no, Eben Slocum, if he'll only set still and keep out of my way that's all I ask."

With a hearty laugh, the doctor desisted from any more efforts to set Tony's anxious desire to help into useful channels ; but as soon as Margarita was really better, he quietly took the little man away one day. And when Tony came back, he was quivering all over with exultant joy.

"I—gotta one job," he announced triumphantly. "Maka da mon.—See? Margarita? Heapa da mon."

Dr. Slocum had found him a place in the shovelling crew of the little railroad that ran through the valley a mile from the village of Oatka Centre.

"Well, land knows I'm glad and thankful enough that you've settled his hash, Eben Slocum," ejaculated Miss Emeline when next she saw the doctor. "Now I shan't be pestered to death stoppin' him from diggin' paths all around Robin Hood's barn except in the places where I'm used to havin' 'em. Would you s'pose now that he'd have to meander all over my dahlia and piny beds to get to the side gate instead of striking a straight

nor'west course same as the steppin' stones? Now I can run my house plain United States ways."

Emily, washing dishes at the shining little sink, smiled to herself. For she had overheard Tony stop in the midst of his farewells to Margarita to urge upon her to begin as soon as she could to help "the kinda Signora," to whom she owed so much. She had heard too the glowing eagerness of Margarita's assent. And only that morning she herself had had to stand and wait with kindly patience for a good ten minutes while Margarita mussed and wrinkled and twisted out of shape two "span-clean" pillow-slips for her bed, in her fumbling efforts to pull them neatly over the pillows to which they belonged.

And then the smile faded away. How would Miss Emeline receive Margarita's pathetic little efforts to return her kindness? Would she, in her utter lack of understanding, hurt the poor child-like little creature?

Miss Emeline's care was as kindly as any one could ask. She herself would work her fingers to the bone for this little stranger within her gates; but could her capable New England soul tolerate the awkwardness of Margarita's untrained fingers for the sake of the feeling they were trying to express? Would she be able to keep from showing her that she was hindering rather than helping? Or were such heights of generosity beyond her?

With a sudden energetic little twist of her dish-cloth as she wrung it out of the soapy water, Emily decided that she would insist upon taking most of the care of the convalescent, leaving the housework to Miss Emeline's more capable and accustomed hands.

But it was Margarita herself who unconsciously put difficulties in the way of her protector. She knew—for Tony had told her repeatedly—that it was Miss Emeline who had found her in the old barn and saved her life by bringing her home to be nursed. And grateful as she was for Emily's gentle ministries, it was Miss Emeline whom she longed most to repay. And so insistently did she beg for something of "Mees Emelina's" own to work upon, that Emily finally set her to winding a ball of yarn for the constant knitting with which the older woman occupied her evenings. In the midst of this labor of love, "Mees Emelina" herself unfortunately came in, and finding the small invalid struggling awkwardly with an obstinate tangle, she removed the hank of blue yarn with a swift and masterly hand. Her admonition to "jest set still and get well" was kindly enough, but there was something in the speed and determination with which she had applied herself to the task of unsnarling that spoke volumes to her niece. Lack of "faculty" was—and always would be—to Miss Emeline as deadly as any of the seven deadly sins.

Nothing more of the needlework kind, therefore, did Emily dare to suggest, but one day she ventured to carry in a pan of apples for Margarita to peel.

"Aunt Emeline has gone out now to gather eggs, Margarita," she explained kindly, "and when she comes in she's going to make some cookies and pies. Wouldn't you like to surprise her by having the apples all pared and ready?"

The joyful light which flashed all over Margarita's dark face was answer enough even without the eager, "Si, si," which accompanied a childlike clapping of the little brown hands.

But before the third long, and, it must be admitted, thick peeling had fallen into the shiny tin basin in Margarita's lap, the back door opened and shut with a decisive bang, swift footfalls crossed the kitchen oilcloth and Miss Emeline herself appeared upon the threshold of the sitting-room door.

"Just look at that, Em'ly," she cried, extending a round splint basket in her right hand. Her keen eye lighted upon the pan in Margarita's lap. "And that!" she cried, stepping across the room and dangling a thick red apple peeling accusingly from her left hand. Then without another word she dropped the incriminating peeling back into the pan, lifted that from Margarita's lap and stalked swiftly back into the kitchen.

Little Margarita raised hurt, bewildered eyes

toward Miss Emily. "She no like-a?" she questioned brokenly. "She no wanta ——"

But just at that minute, Emily Parlow caught sight of Dr. Slocum's tall form passing the window. He was coming around the house, as was the custom of Oatka Centre, to enter by the kitchen door.

"Here comes the doctor!" she cried with quick relief. "You always like to see the doctor, Margarita. And maybe he can tell you something about Tony. Smile now for the doctor, so he can see how well you are!" she coaxed playfully.

Miss Emeline did not accompany the doctor into the sitting-room but when he stepped again into the kitchen she was awaiting him, with her hands busily occupied with the panful of apples which she had taken away from Margarita. She was not seated in her splint-bottomed rocker. Nothing but the hardest of her shiny yellow kitchen chairs could match the martial decision of her bearing to-day.

"I'll thank you to shut the sittin'-room door, Eben Slocum," she accosted him crisply. Then, as he obeyed, "And you might set down a minute if you're so inclined. How's *she* gettin' on?" Her busy fingers never faltered for a moment in their task, but a swift jerk of her head over her right shoulder was sufficient indication of Margarita.

"First-rate, first-rate, Emeline," responded the doctor, letting his huge frame gingerly down into

the splint rocker. "You and Emily have done a good job there and no mistake. Between you and me I didn't have much hope of pulling that little girl through that day you found her in the barn."

"And now she's pretty nigh well?" pursued Miss Emeline, paring even more rapidly than before—if possible.

"Pretty nigh," agreed the old doctor genially, "pretty nigh. A few days more of your good nursing and she'll be as right as a trivet."

"Well, then, Eben Slocum, I guess likely it's time for you to hand in your bill." With a swift pounce Miss Emeline deposited the pan of paper-thin peelings upon the table, and began to slice the pared apples with unabated vigor.

"Why, I dunno as I'd worry about that yet awhile if I was you, Emeline," answered the old doctor placidly. "I'm not in any such rush to get my money as all that comes to."

"I s'pose it don't occur to you that I might be in a hurry myself," flashed back Miss Emeline. "'Tain't always so convenient to get your money out of the bank, as 'tis to go down cellar and get a potato; and if you must know the ins and outs of the hull matter, Mis' Christie is goin' up to West Bainbridge to-morrer. She come over last night to see if I had any errands to send; and bein's as I was going to draw out anyhow I thought I'd ruther not make two bites of a cherry."

The doctor's pleasant face clouded. "Do you have to draw money out of the bank to pay me, Emeline?" he inquired with a show of kindly concern that was far from pleasing to its object.

"Well, where'd you s'pose I'd get it, Eben Slocum?" she returned tartly. "Do you think I haven't got any more gumption 'n to keep enough change in my blue bowl to pay such a bill as yours is likely to be after you've been runnin' here night and day for land knows how long?"

The cloud on the doctor's kindly old face deepened. He knew what Miss Emeline's financial arrangements must be, for an unwritten law in such matters governed all the women living alone in that little village. Twice a year, in June and December, they drew out the interest on their savings-bank deposits, and "made it do," whatever expenses came up, until the next semi-annual period came around. Miss Emeline was reputed to be better off than most of the village spinsters, but here she was drawing out her money—that must be her carefully guarded principal—and it was only the first of March!

"Why sho now, Emeline," he said rather awkwardly. "You didn't s'pose I was going to charge you anything for that little creeter, did you? You've given her a home and as good nursing as she could have got anywhere in the world, and I guess you've done your part without paying doc-

tors' bills besides. I can stand for that much, I guess."

Miss Emeline's black eyes snapped so that it was a miracle that her glasses didn't crack.

"Land sakes alive and Goshen, Eben Slocum!" she ejaculated. "What under the canopy be you talkin' about? Who called you in to this case, I'd like to know? And who took some of your rank-tastin' contraptions herself to please Em'ly? And swallered 'em down and wasted 'em, even if 'twas the hot flat that cured her? No siree, Eben Slocum, when I get to where I can't pay my just bills that I've run up myself, I'll start out for the poorhouse and git back some of the taxes the Parlows have been payin' ever sence this town was settled. But until then I'm not askin' for charity from nobody!" The old doctor laughed apologetically before this onslaught of Independence Rampant.

"Sho now, Emeline," he said, "you needn't ruffle up like a wet hen. You might know I didn't intend any offense. I don't just see yet how you're the only person in town that's got a right to do for that poor little creeter, but that's neither here nor there. If you want a bill, so be it. I'll send one down by Becky to-night."

Then, with an instinctive desire to relieve the situation, he leaned forward as he rose slowly from his chair, and lifted one of Margarita's thick red apple

peelings on one finger. It had caught on the side of the pan as Miss Emeline dropped it back.

"I guess you can afford a good big one, by the looks of that," he said jocularly. "Since when have you begun wasting a good quarter inch of apple-paring, Emeline?"

"Since never!" snapped Miss Emeline. "That's some of my niece Em'ly's work.

"Jest because them two little Eyetalians are so dead set on helpin' she will let 'em do things—all hind side before most or whatever. This is some of Margarita's helpin's—poor ignorant slack-twisted little piece that she is! And here's another." Swiftly she rose, picked up the splint basket from its place on the sink-bench, and held it before the doctor's gaze. "Sixteen eggs of old Whitey's that I found this mornin' in a nest she stole durin' the time Tony was here. Em'ly would have him go out and hunt the eggs anyways—'the poor feller was so anxious to help'! And like a fool I let him. Did you s'pose it took any special gumption to keep track of hen's eggs, Eben Slocum? Well, no more did I. And when I come in hotfoot to show 'em these, this was what I found in Margarita's lap!" She swung about and pointed to the pan with the incriminating red peeling hanging over its side like a danger signal. "Lucky enough she hadn't done but three," she ended with grim triumph, "and you can bet your bottom dollar

that I switched that out of her hands and out here into the kitchen before you could say Jack Robinson."

But the old doctor's kindly face was stern now; even his kindly old voice had grown stern too as he answered.

"So that was why that poor little creeter's big black eyes were full of tears when I went in there just now, was it?" he said accusingly. "That was why Emily had to beg her to 'smile for the doctor,' her that's usually smiling and chattering like a little brook?

"Do you know what you deserve that somebody should do to you, Emeline Parlow, and what I'd hope they would if I didn't have to depend on the Lord's mercy and forgiveness so much myself?" He spoke with slow impressiveness. "Send you a bill that would take a sight more than every penny you could rake and scrape to pay it, and then refuse to accept a single cent on account unless you could hand it all out at once in shining gold eagles! And keep you feeling beholden all the rest of your life! Nobody admires what you've done for those folks more than I do, Emeline, taking them in and feeding and nursing them. But as long as you set yourself up on a pedestal of never being 'beholden' to anybody yourself, while you won't accept those poor little things' blundering efforts to pay you back just a mite for all you've

done, you're feeding and nursing your own pride and independence a good sight more than you are the Lord's little sick child—and don't you forget it!"

He stooped heavily to pick up his shapeless, bulging old satchel, and then pulled his worn fur cap slowly down over his ears. "If I was young Elder Thomson," he added in his usual kindly tone, pausing on his way to the door, "I suppose I could have pointed out to you how the Lord's been giving you a chance lately to pay back some of your debts in the only way you ever can by doing for one of His lambs, but of course I'm not a preacher——"

"I shouldn't worry none about that if I was you, Eben Slocum," interrupted Miss Emeline crisply. "Your discourse mightn't have been as long as some, but I've seldom heard a sermon that was more thurrer nor went straighter to the point. Be sure you shut that door good now. You left it kinder on the latch when you come in."

She nodded non-committally in farewell as the door closed with a convincing snap, and stood gazing at it for a silent minute. Then, "Humph!" she ejaculated thoughtfully, and seating herself again in the shiny yellow chair, she picked up the pan and began slicing swiftly. By the look on her keen old face you could tell that her brain was working even more quickly than her fingers. Once or twice she nodded her head.

Suddenly she laid down her knife. "She couldn't make such a mess of this job, I s'pose," she mused aloud, and half arose.

Then she smiled almost tenderly and yet with her usual grim appreciation of a joke on herself.

"Land, no. The only thing Eben Slocum's discourse lacked was the application—and 'twould be a shame not to have that as thurrer as the sermon itself. But whoever would 'a' thought they had feelings like we do? Land, Lord, You've got an awful sight to teach me. I only hope You won't get discouraged."

Placing the pan of half-sliced apples on the table with one of her characteristic swift movements, she seized another pan from the shining array on the pantry shelf, opened the "cellar-way" door, and descended the stairs.

When she returned, she carried in her hand a heaping panful of Baldwins, her most prized fruit. With this and her own paring knife in hand she stepped to the closed sitting-room door and flung it wide.

"Well, how's little Margarita getting on since the doctor left?" she inquired cheerfully. "Feelin' like helpin' me out a mite, be you, sissy? I've got a whole panful of apples here that need parin' and slicin' the worst way; and I guess from what the doctor says you're well enough so't I can ask you to do it for me, hey?"

She had meant to add a few kindly hints as to the right way of peeling, but at the sight of child-like joy in Margarita's face and Margarita's out-stretched eager hands, she resolved to postpone such lessons till another day.

"Let her think for to-day, anyways, that her cent's a double eagle and she's paying me up handsome," she said to herself, with a kindly smile transfiguring her face; and flung down her last wall of defense with her own hands.

"Did the doctor say anything about Tony?" she queried. "I was kinder hopin' he'd be able to git off this Saturday afternoon. There's quite a lot of odd jobs accumulated that needs a man to see to 'em ——"

"And Tony can digga da snow too?" cried Margarita delightedly. "Eh, Mees Emelina? Tony digga da snow?"

Miss Emeline nodded. "Yes, indeed," she agreed crisply. "There ain't nobody that ever digs a path like Tony—that I ever see!" her lips twitched humorously.

"I shall always be real beholden to you and Tony, Margarita—for a heap more than you know; and I can't never hope to pay it all back." She stooped and kissed the warm brown cheek.

X

"CHICKENS"

"SHOO! Shoo! Shoo-oo!" cried Miss Emeline Parlow, flapping her blue gingham apron energetically from the top of her new back door-steps. "Get along home, you little nuisance, you, and stay where you belong! Shoo!"

Little Mary Christie, skipping around the corner of the house, laughed gaily. "Are you talking to me, Miss Emeline?" she inquired, "because I was coming to call on you and Miss Emily for a few minutes, and bring you a May-basket, but if you feel like that ——"

She came to an abrupt stop and gazed ruefully after two excited bunches of gray feathers which had veered at sight of her and were hastening in opposite directions, squawking wildly.

"Oh, dear," she cried, "I'm afraid I've scared your chickens perfectly to death! But never mind. You just wait and I'll shoo 'em right back for you."

Dropping the basket which she held in her hand, she raced off in hot pursuit of Chicken No. 1 which

was apparently bent upon beating itself to the farthest corner of the front yard; while Miss Emeline started a little more deliberately after Chicken No. 2 which was equally interested in reaching the extreme back fence in record time.

Being more experienced in chasing poultry, Miss Emeline soon rounded up her victim, and was shepherding it—with a rake—toward the front gate, when she caught sight of her assistant running madly in the same direction.

"What you doin', Mary Christie?" she screamed. "You'll drive this chicken back again if you don't look out. Get out of its way, quick!"

But even as she spoke, Chicken No. 2 turned and dashed toward the rake which Miss Emeline was still brandishing. It seemed as if she could not fail to impale herself on its sharp teeth. Just at the last moment, however, she saw this danger, turned again and fled to cover, squeezing herself miraculously under the latticework beneath the new back steps.

"Well, now I have done it!" ejaculated Miss Emeline disgustedly. "A nice kettle of fish I've got here! That pullet won't never be able to get out by herself in this living world—and there she'll stay and squawk till kingdom come unless we tear the house down to get her out. What kind of luck did you have with yourn, Mary Christie?" she finished, catching sight of Mary Christie's blue-clad

figure, just returning around the corner with unwonted dejection written upon her usually sunny face.

"Oh, dear, Miss Emeline," she cried, "I'm just the worst hen-chaser that ever was! First I scared mine so that it climbed right over the fence into the road, and then when I was running to the gate to get it, I scared yours again; and then I lost my own entirely. I'm so sorry, Miss Emeline dear, but that chicken has just disappeared right off the face of the earth. I turned a minute when you called, and when I saw I couldn't help you I ran out into the road and there wasn't even a gray feather in sight. I *am* so sorry! If it doesn't come back tonight I'll bring over my own Chicka Biddy to take her place. But chickens do mostly come home to roost, don't they?"

"For the land sakes alive, child, 'come back tonight!'" retorted Miss Emeline crisply. "Did you think them chickens was mine? And was you a-tryin' to get 'em back into my hen-yard? Wal, if that don't show that the right way to go to work with chickens is wrong end foremost! Here I've been tryin' this whole livin' mornin' to shoo 'em down the road to Abby Ellwood's and they've landed in my back pastur' mostly! And now you come along and try to head one of 'em toward my hen-yard, and it starts off for home so spry that you can't even keep track of it! Hens certainly

do beat the Dutch when it comes to contrariness!" She ended with her usual demi-semi-chuckle.

Mary Christie's face was again radiant. "Oh," she laughed happily, "did I do the right thing after all? Isn't that just too funny? Just because it knew I wanted it to stay here, it ran home! But I thought of course those gray chickens were yours. They're just like yours, aren't they, Miss Emeline?"

"And good reason why," returned Miss Emeline curtly. "I sold Abby Ellwood the settin' of eggs they was raised from—more fool I! And that's the way that batch of chickens comes home to roost—by scratchin' up pretty nigh every single seed that I've sowed in my garden this spring! And now here's this one come to roost under my back steps till doomsday!" She inserted her rake handle through the lattice and began to poke vigorously.

"What a shame!" cried Mary Christie sympathetically. "And how *terrible* Mrs. Ellwood will feel when she hears about it!" She knelt down and applied her eye to another hole in the lattice.

Miss Emeline sniffed. "Oh, yes," she returned with dry emphasis, "Abby Ellwood will prob'bly feel so bad that she can't relish her vittles." Then with a rapid change of tone: "Here, Mary Christie, jump up quick and stand by me and holler

'Shoo!' as loud as you can—I believe my soul that pullet's tryin' to —— Oh, land o' Goshen, here comes Em'ly around the corner; just the very way it was going and ——"

But even as she spoke a bunch of gray feathers and a series of wild squawks cleft the air simultaneously, and poor harassed Biddy dashed through the circle that surrounded her and winged her way toward some haven of refuge behind the wood-shed.

"Oh, poor Aunt Emeline!" called Emily contritely. "Are those miserable chickens here again, and did I scare it just as it was going home?"

But Miss Emeline shook her head stoically. "Mercy me, no, I don't s'pose so," she answered. "Just for one minute I had hopes, for she was headed that way, but I might 'a' known that as long as that cantankerous fowl knew I wanted her to go to Abby Ellwood's she'd end up in my back yard. If I could only make her think I wanted her here she'd likely start for home with all sails set—but someway I can't do that proper. That's one of the drawbacks of training up a child in the way she should go; when she's old she can't depart from it even enough to fool a hen."

"I suppose of course you've asked Mrs. Ellwood to keep them at home, Miss Emeline, haven't you?" inquired Mary Christie suddenly.

"No, nor I hain't asked the President of the United States nor yet the Town Board," retorted

Miss Emeline with prompt sarcasm, "though I expect it would do just about as much good."

"Why, then that's the trouble!" Mary Christie's face cleared delightedly. "I knew that such a nice lady as Mrs. Ellwood—I'll go right now and tell her all about it. I'm practising on living up to the motto that you gave me, Miss Emily: 'Do it now!' so good-bye." And away she skipped down the walk like a bit of quicksilver clothed in blue gingham.

"Here now ——" began Miss Emeline and then shut her mouth with a snap, and stood gazing after her young guest till she disappeared down the road with a farewell wave of the hand.

Then she turned suddenly, leaned her rake against the side of the porch, and began to climb the steps with unwonted slowness.

"Oh, wal, what's the use?" she said half aloud. "That little gal will find out soon enough what kind of folks there be in the world. I should feel as if I was prying open the eyes of a three-day kitten if I was to tell her all I know."

Emily followed her up the steps.

"Aunt Emeline," she said as she entered the kitchen, "I have often wondered why you seem to dislike Mrs. Ellwood so much. I know you must have some good reason, but I'm like little Mary Christie about that; Mrs. Ellwood has always seemed very nice to me."

Miss Emeline turned toward her swiftly. "Well, then it is time and good time, Em'ly Parlow," she cried, "that you heard tell of what she did to your own folks' kith and kin in the years gone by. You set right down there and listen.

"Gran'ther Parlow in his last days failed, as old folks will, and one mornin' he got it into his head that we had had to mortgage the house to pay for his keep. He felt real worked-up about it, o' course —bringing such a disgrace on the family—but we all argufied with him and told him it wasn't so, till finally he went off putterin' about the yard, contented-like, same as he always did.—Gran'ther always prided himself that we never had to hire a man to do chores while he was alive—and we thought he'd entirely gi'n up the idee and was all right agin.

"But about an hour or so after that, I happened to go into the parlor bedroom to sweep. And when I run up the shades I see Gran'ther stannin' there by the gate talkin' to Abby Ellwood—she was Abby Pierce then—and he was cryin' like a child and wipin' his eyes on his red bandanna.

"I knew right away what was the matter, and I was so worked up myself that I didn't wait to get a shawl or even to go around by the back way. I just threw my apron up over my head and started for the front door and out onto the door-stone on the dead run.

"It flustered Gran' ther so to see me come peltin' down the front walk that way that he couldn't even remember what he was cryin' about when I asked him, but Abby Pierce she spoke right up.

"'It's about the mortgage, Emeline,' says she; 'poor old soul, it does worry him dretful, and no wonder, for he feels he's to blame. I hadn't never heard tell a word about it till to-day and it clean took my breath away.'

"By that time Gran'ther had kind of sidled away from us so I could speak right out, so I told her all about it—how 'twas jest an old folks' notion and not a word of truth in it and all; and she seemed real pleased and o' course I thought that was the end of it, for Abby Pierce had always let on that she was a special friend of mine when we went to school together.

"Just then I see Gran'ther beginnin' to dig up my best piny, so I had to run, but Abby was a master-hand for talk,—so, as I went, I sung out over my shoulder, 'You see that this story don't get around now, Abby!' And she says, 'All right, Emeline, you know you can trust me!' And off she started.

"I thought at the time that 'twas a little strange that she headed back for the village, for she had her arms full of her tradin' as she stood there; but land, I never thought but what I could depend on Abby Pierce after what she said, much as she

loved to talk, and anyway my whole mind was set on impressin' it on Gran'ther that he mustn't tell that story to another soul. He promised faithful that he wouldn't, but I wa'n't jest easy in my mind about it an' for the next two, three days I followed him as close as if I was his shadder. I didn't need to neither as it turned out, for he never mentioned it again nor seemed to think if it even.

"But not so the village. Folks didn't come to our house much—Ma never encouraged 'em to—but by the next time I went down to the stores the hull village was buzzin' with it. Abby Pierce had done her work well that mornin', and the meanest part of it all to my mind was the way that she'd laid it all onto Gran'ther. Whenever I'd ask anybody how they heard it, they'd say—'Why, your Gran'ther was telling it around, wa'n't he?' Never a word about Abby Pierce—so well had she covered her tracks.

"Gran'ther—poor soul—was dead and in his grave long before the story ever died down, but Ma and the rest of us had to bear the disgrace for years and years, for there is always folks o' course that would ruther believe that Gran'ther told the truth and that we were tryin' to hide it.

"And from that day till after she come back here a widder we none of us never spoke a word to Abby Pierce that we didn't have to, though she tried agin and agin to be like old times. Then she

come to Aunt Bethia's funeral and I couldn't help but let her act neighborly on such an occasion, and besides everybody was dead and gone but me.

"So that was the enterin' wedge —— And since you come, Em'ly, in answer to my prayers, and the Lord's been so good to me, I've tried real hard to let bygones be bygones. But when even the eggs that I sell her turn into chickens that come a-pesterin' me, I can't help but wonder when some of her other chickens will get home to roost. And if that verse is true, Em'ly, about 'what measure ye mete,' why is it do you s'pose that somebody don't spread some lyin' story about her and her folks? That's what I'd like to know."

Suddenly her wrathful tone softened and a subtle change came over her grim face as she noticed Emily's troubled expression.

"There, there," she went on hastily, "you think I'm a hard old woman, don't you? But there's things that ain't easy to forgive, and malignin' your folks is one of 'em. And takin' advantage of a poor old man's talk is another. Can't you kind of see, Em'ly, how I feel?"

Emily stepped over and impulsively kissed Miss Emeline's withered cheek. "Indeed I can," she cried with eager sympathy. "Such things do seem almost unforgiveable. But oh, Aunt Emeline, do let's try to forgive her just the same! God is so good and we both have so much to be happy about

this spring, that I hate even to remember anything but that."

Miss Emeline gazed into the upturned face—now shining not only with health and happiness but with an inner light that somehow always frightened her.

"She's too good to be long for this world," her quaking old heart whispered to itself whenever she saw the particular brightness, and as always her crisp old voice grew almost tender as she answered:

"Land alive, Em'ly, if being a missionary can make anybody as full of grace as you be, I almost wish 't Ma had sent me out to furrin parts when I was young. I'll try to forgive her as you say—needing forgiveness myself as I do every day of my life. But I'm free to confess" (Miss Emeline's humor would out) "it would come enough sight easier to me to do it if a few of her chickens would come home to roost—both kinds!"

XI

HOME TO ROOST

TEN minutes later the door flew open and Mary Christie, breathless with running, popped inside.

"Oh, Miss Emeline," she panted, "Mrs. Ellwood —says you must be mistaken—that all her chickens are shut up tight—and couldn't get out—and ——"

In spite of herself Miss Emeline shot a triumphant glance toward her niece. "Well, you needn't run your legs off to tell me that, Mary Christie," she interrupted crisply; "I could 'a' told you that much before you went. Nobody ever owns up to their chickens bein' out pesterin' the neighborhood. And I never expected Abby Ellwood to be the one to begin."

"Oh, it wasn't that—I ran for," explained Mary Christie in eager little gasps. "But I met Mr. Paul Masters on the road and he told me the cutest thing to do. He said just what you did—that people never thought their own chickens ever bothered anybody. So this is what he did once.

He fixed little tags that said: 'Please keep your chickens at home,' and he tied each one on a piece of string; and on the other end of the string he tied a piece of corn. And he scattered them around his garden. And the hens picked them up and swallowed them and then ran off home like little Bo Peep's sheep dragging those signs behind 'em. And people had to own up then." She stopped to giggle merrily. "Oh, can't you just see how funny they looked? Just imagine a nice fat old grandmother hen cocking her head on one side and looking down at her tag and saying, 'Cut, cut, cut, cut! What—does—this—mean?'" She imitated the stately Biddy's astonishment so accurately that Emily burst into peals of delighted laughter, and even Miss Emeline's firm lips relaxed into a smile.

"And now, Miss Emily," went on Mary eagerly, "can't we get right to work and fix the bait? You might write the cards if you please, for Mother says I'm not such a good writer as I ought to be for a pretty near young lady (someway you see I always have so much to do that I can't bother awfully about my loops and things), and I'll punch the holes and tie on the string. But that doesn't leave anything for you to do, does it, Miss Emeline? And of course everybody wants to help. I tell you—you can scatter them out in the garden—that will be the most fun of all."

Miss Emeline refused this self-sacrificing offer—to her guest's very evident relief!—but on the whole the plan decidedly appealed to her well-developed sense of humor and in less than twenty minutes Mary Christie was scattering a dozen alluringly plump grains of corn around the devastated garden-patch. Then she waited for the whole of an anxious and excited hour for some victims to appear.

"Didn't you never hear about 'a watched pot never boils,' Mary Christie?" inquired Miss Emeline as her little guest returned from her tenth scouting expedition, and dropped disappointedly into the little patchwork rocker. "You run along home for a while and play with the other young ones and forget all about it. Then you can come back about supper-time and count the kernels. That's the main thing, you know—to see if any of 'em are gone. If you was around in sight, the chickens would go the wrong way just out of cantankerousness—so 'twouldn't prove nothin'."

Recognizing the justice of these remarks, Mary Christie skipped obediently down the road; and in the delights of an original form of tag just invented by Nora O'Neill, she did almost forget the fascinating detective scheme which she had left behind her.

In fact it was quite supper-time—for chickens anyway—by the time that her flying feet ran down

Miss Emeline's flagged path. Miss Emeline herself, in blue gingham sunbonnet, and little checked shawl, was just shutting the gate of her carefully fenced "hen-pen" behind her. Someway her tall spare figure looked even more austere than usual; and her face did not even brighten at the sight of her little guest. Instead she paused and waved her empty feeding-pan imperiously.

"Go get Em'ly and come here!" she commanded in the grimmest tone that Mary had ever heard issue from her lips.

"And look there!" she continued, flinging open the gate, as Mary and Miss Emily reached her. She pointed an accusing finger toward two dejected looking fowls which huddled by themselves in one corner.

Mary looked; then she squealed—a surprised little squeal—then she darted forward; then she hopped up and down and squealed again—a jolly little squeal of merriment this time.

"Oh, what a joke!" she cried. "What a perfectly lovely joke! Isn't it, Miss Emeline? Oh, I never knew anything so funny! Oh, Miss Emily, see!"

For from the beaks of those two dejected looking chickens trailed dirty little bits of white string and at the end of each string dangled a dirty little bit of pasteboard!

"Oh, isn't it the best joke on all of us that you

ever, ever knew?" repeated Mary Christie gleefully. "Isn't it fun that they were yours all the time? And the way we worked over those tags!" She burst into another little explosion of laughter.

Miss Emeline's grim face lightened just a trifle. "Wal, that's as may be," she returned. "Most folks don't see as much to laugh at in a joke on themselves as you seem to. But 'tis funny—I'm free to confess. And though I feel as cheap as the ten-cent store over to Wright's Corners, I can stand it all right to have the joke, as you call it, on me.

"But what I can't stand," she turned toward her niece, who was looking on with a quiet smile, "is the stories I've been a-spreadin' and the feelin's I've been a-feelin' against Abby Ellwood and her chickens that I sold her the settin's of. Those special chickens of mine didn't lose no time in comin' home to roost, did they? Mebbe that's a sign ——"

"Dear Mrs. Ellwood will be awfully pleased, though," cried Mary Christie happily. "She hated awfully to have you think they were hers. Shan't I go and tell her for you?"

"Jest as much obliged, but you needn't," answered Miss Emeline crisply. "I'll jest step up and see Abby Ellwood myself, I guess, and face my own music. You can drop in to Ruby Goodnow's and Deacon Caldwell's, though, on your way home and tell them the rights of it. And don't forget

to tell it to your ma and put in all the frills too. 'Twas only this mornin' that I was lodgin' my complaints with her."

With an unmistakable gesture of farewell, she pounced swiftly across the hen-yard, grasped each of the disconsolate chickens in turn and swiftly relieved them of their embarrassing trophies.

"First thing to-morrow mornin'," she announced to Emily who still stood watching with her quiet, tender smile, "you and I'll go round this yard and find the place where they get out. I'll be busy enough before sundown to-night eatin' supper and gettin' this chicken ready for Abby Ellwood. You run, Em'ly, and put on a kettle of water to bile."

Two hours later, Miss Emeline, garbed in her "prayer-meeting bonnet" and shawl, as befitted the solemnity of the occasion, stood on her neighbor's side door-step and knocked imperatively.

"Good-evenin', Abby!" she said, awkwardly extending the splint basket in her hand as Mrs. Ellwood opened the door. "I brought you a chicken ——" and then stopped in utter surprise.

For Mrs. Ellwood, with one fleeting glance at the basket, had flung her white apron up to her eyes with both hands, and was sobbing into it brokenly.

"Oh, dear!" she cried, "oh, dear! oh, dear! Has it got all around town a'ready? So that even you, Emeline Parlow, are a-bringin' ——?"

Miss Emeline, once more her capable self, seized the other woman by the shoulder, pushed her inside, and shut the door.

"For the pity sakes, Abby Pierce," she said sharply, "whatever's come over you? Has what got around town? Have you had a loss?"

Mrs. Ellwood nodded and then swiftly shook her head.

"Yes, no," she stammered. "Oh, not in the way you mean—not any of my folks—but the bank over to Meadville, where I had all my money, has failed, and my daughter's husband has lost his job, so that she can't do nothin' to help me. And —and I decided to-day that I'd got to mortgage my place to get money for my keep, and I sent for Deacon Caldwell to talk it over—but oh, Emeline, it seems as if I couldn't never bear the disgrace!" she sobbed brokenly.

For a moment the stern light of satisfied vengeance gleamed in Miss Emeline's face. At last the measure for which she had been waiting had been meted out! At last ——

Then her glance fell upon the basket which she had placed on a chair, and her face changed. She had been looking for a chance to make reparation for her own injustice—and here it was laid in her very hands.

The struggle that was mirrored in her strong old face was as sharp as that between an imprecatory

psalm and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But "the root of the matter," as the old divines used to say, was firmly intrenched in Miss Emeline's softening heart. And the Gospel of Jesus Christ triumphed, as it always must, in the end.

"Don't take on so, Abby," she said hastily, patting Mrs. Ellwood's shaking shoulder with awkward but kindly fingers. "You won't have to get a mortgage yet a while, I guess. Liza's husband will get a job as soon as this slack time's over, likely, and Em'ly and me can tide you over the summer all right. Em'ly was sayin' only yesterday that she needed some sewing done the worst way. She's goin' off to that Chautauqua place to give some lectures as soon as it opens, you know, and I know she'd enough sight ruther have you than Patience Giffard. And what with my home and the garden I've got planted and all, I guess I've got plenty to help out an old neighbor like you for a summer's livin', without her mortgagin' her house just for that."

"Oh, Emeline," little Mrs. Ellwood was sobbing again, but this time her tears were of pure joy, "oh, Emeline, how can I thank you enough?" she cried. "I might 'a' known you'd feel for me, though. Just as I felt for you that day I found Gran'ther Parlow down to the village a-tellin' the men about your folks havin' one ——"

"You what?" interrupted Miss Emeline sharply.

"You found Gran'ther Parlow down to the store, did you say?"

Mrs. Ellwood looked her surprise.

"Why certain," she answered. "Didn't you never know that, Emeline? Why yes, I found him down there a-talkin'; and o' course I knew how you'd feel to have it spread abroad so—so I hushed him up as well as I could and fetched him along home with me. And then when you told me 'twan't so, I hustled right back to set things as straight as you asked me, but you know how 'tis, Emeline—some folks was gone and some would ruther believe the wrong than the right—so that was why I couldn't hush it all up—hard as I worked. I knew you and Ma Parlow thought I hadn't done my best; and that was why you felt so hard to me all those years—but that's the kind of thing you can't prove, and anyway you wouldn't listen when I tried to set myself straight. Land, here I be a-runnin' on and never even thanked you proper for that chicken. And if you didn't know about my losses, Emeline, how in the world did you happen to bring that chicken over?"

Miss Emeline shook her head. "That was what I was jest a-goin' to tell you, Abby," she said, "but so many of my other chickens has took this time to come home to roost that I'm all of a caterwumpuss in my mind.

"Abby!" she ended abruptly, "if the Lord can

see His way to forgive an old woman that's been blind as a bat, and hard feelinged and bitter most of her life—do you think you could ?—Even if she thought chickens was yourn that wa'n't—in more ways than one ? "

Mrs. Ellwood's sweet old face beamed. " Land, Emeline," she cried, extending her hands, " I can't even see no such person to forgive. All I can see and thank the Lord for is my old friend Emeline that's come back to me again after all of these years bringin' her own chickens—all dressed and ready for me to use—when I need 'em worst."

XII

EMILY'S "BEAU"

"OH, is that you, Abby?" Miss Emeline Parlow stepped briskly out of her pantry in response to the click of the screen door. "Step right in and take a seat if you think you can put up with such a hullabaloo as I've got here. This room looks ready to ride out. Em'ly hated to go away and ——"

"Where's Em'ly gone?" inquired Mrs. Ellwood interestedly as she lowered her solid bulk cautiously into Miss Emeline's patchwork rocker. "I guessed 'twas her I see a-going by with the new minister just afore I started out. Headed toward South Middleton, wa'n't they?"

"Uh-humph!" Miss Emeline nodded matter-of-factly. "He was going over to South Middleton this morning and he knew that Em'ly had some tradin' to do over there, so he stopped in his new Ford and asked her to go along. Being a man, o' course he didn't have any idee of a woman's mornin' work; and 'twas such a good chance that I made her put on her hat and go right along."

"He seems to get a sight of comfort out of that little Ford of hisn, don't he?" By this time Mrs.

Ellwood had opened her work-bag and was creaking to and fro, knitting as she rocked. "Some folks o' course think 'tain't orthodox for a minister to have nothin' but a horse; but I do' know; some horses is chock full of original sin when it comes to that."

Miss Emeline nodded. "Orthodox!" she sniffed. "Humph! What is orthodox anyhow? As near as I can make out in this town it's what Deacon Cottle and Deacon Skinner hain't neither of 'em took a miff at. They talk about what the Lord favors, but land, I've noticed time and again that the ones that claim that the Lord has picked 'em out to reveal His special idees to ain't the ones that other folks would pick out for that job, not by a long chalk. Anyway I guess an ex-missionary like my niece Em'ly is orthodox enough for anybody, and she likes an automobile first-rate. I wish to the land I could afford to buy one for her to use when she travels round over the hills seein' her poor folks, as she calls 'em! I will too if that Californy business turns out to mean anything."

Mrs. Ellwood dropped her stocking and leaned forward with eager interest. "Californy business?" she echoed. "What d'ye mean, Emeline? Is Em'ly likely to come into any property out there?"

Miss Emeline stiffened perceptibly. "Not as I've heard of," she retorted dryly—and promptly

retired to the pantry whence a lively clatter of pots and pans immediately issued.

"There now, why couldn't I 'a' kept still?" murmured Mrs. Ellwood to herself, with a regretful shake of her head. "You hain't got to tell me if you don't want to, Emeline," she called as soon as the noise lessened a trifle, "though I can keep a secret with the best; and there ain't nobody more interested in Em'ly and Em'ly's doings than I be. Why, when I see her a-ridin' out with the young minister to-day ——"

"Now for the land sakes, Abby Ellwood," Miss Emeline bounced suddenly back into the kitchen, "Em'ly ain't a-ridin' out with the young minister —not to say ridin' out. He just happened to know that she wanted to go over to South Middleton so he stopped and took her same's he'd 'a' took you or me or old Grandmother Mullins for that matter."

She tossed her head defiantly as she spoke, as one who dared the world at large not to agree with her; but Mrs. Ellwood was placidly knitting and did not take up the challenge. "And anyways," continued Miss Emeline, swiftly changing the subject, "the Californy business wa'n't Em'ly's at all, but mine; and your not having heard of it proves that Marthy Watkins can keep her tongue quiet in spite of what folks say. I've always maintained myself that Marthy was full as good a postmaster as any man we've ever had, and this proves

it to my mind. Do you believe now that there are many men that would 'a' kept it to themselves when they got a letter from Californy asking news about the descendants of Elkanah Parlow? Specially as she's figgered it out that somebody's died out there and left me some money mebbe? O' course I don't think that's it myself, though," she ended hastily, "and I oughtn't to 'a' spoke till I knew."

Mrs. Ellwood laid down her knitting again and frankly beamed all over her pleasant countenance. "Well, sho now, Emeline," she cried delightedly, "I want to know. Well, nobody can't say as you don't deserve it—good as you've been to all sorts of folks—me and Em'ly in special."

"For the mercy sakes, Abby," interrupted Miss Emeline, "don't go to talking that way as if 'twas sure. I only said that was Marthy Watkins' idee. I dunno how that ever popped out, what I said about getting Em'ly an automobile. For pity's sakes, Abby, don't you let it get no farther."

Mrs. Ellwood shook her head energetically. "No indeed," she said, "no indeed, Emeline. I guess I can be full as much of a clam as Marthy Watkins if I set out. Besides it is kind of tempting Providence, I always think, countin' your chickens afore they're hatched. Only if I was you," chuckled Mrs. Ellwood knowingly, "I wouldn't waste my money a-buying of no auto-

mobile for Em'ly. The young minister'll be only too pleased to ride her round in hisn any hour of the day or night."

Miss Emeline stiffened. "I've told you before that there wa'n't a grain of truth in that idee," she said shortly. "He'd 'a' took me if I'd wanted to go and could 'a' spared the time. I dunno but he asked me."

"Like as not," Mrs. Ellwood chuckled again. "You're Em'ly's a'nt and he prob'bly knows what store she sets by you. For the mercy sakes, Emeline, what you playin' ostrich for? Anybody with eyes in their heads can see how things are goin'; —and I should think any woman in her senses would be tickled to death to have her girl get such a likely beau as the young minister. They're few and far between these days."

"He ain't her beau, I tell you," Miss Emeline's voice was sharper than before. "I guess I know. He's just interested in Chiny, and neighborly, and all that. Em'ly ain't going to go right away and get married and leave me; and you needn't think it, Abby Ellwood."

Realizing at last that there was in Miss Emeline's voice a note of real pain, kindly Mrs. Ellwood hastily swallowed her words.

"Course not, Emeline, course not," she soothed. "I was just a-teasing of you, same as if 'twas you yourself. Em'ly thinks the world and all of you,

Emeline, we all know that, and o' course the young minister's interested in Chiny. We all are these days, with Em'ly here to stir us up, and make us see how folksy-like the heathen Chinee be. And b'sides seems to me that he said something once about knowing some other missionary out there too. Somebody that was in college with him, if I remember right. Likely they spent their time talking about him and the work."

Miss Emeline nodded. "Now you're talking sense," she commented crisply, "which reelly better becomes a woman of your age than a-teasin', as you call it, about beaux like young ones! Did you bring over that receipt for green tomato pickles?"

"Why, there now," apologized Mrs. Ellwood, "if I didn't come over here in such a brash that I clean forgot it. I guess I can remember it, though." The conversation slipped easily into safe domestic channels.

But the gift of tact had been conspicuously left out of the composition of the next caller, the driver of the village "stage" who arrived with a parcel shortly after Mrs. Ellwood took her leave. He too had seen Emily and the "young elder" on the road to South Middleton and the more icily Miss Emeline met his jokes on the subject of "Emily's beau," the more wantonly did he press them home.

"Why, I swan to man!" he ejaculated at last,

with an enormous laugh shaking his burly figure, "I believe you're jealous, Emeline. Got your eye on the young minister yourself, have you; and don't want no other girl to go out joy-ridin' in that little buzz wagon of hisn? I must tell Em'ly to look out or you'll be stealin' her beau away yet, haw, haw!" Still shaking with laughter he turned away, unmindful of the sharp retort which Miss Emeline flung after him.

Left to herself, Miss Emeline plunged into her work with even more than her usual swiftness and energy; as one will who is trying to escape troublesome thoughts.

All at once she set the pan of potatoes which she was peeling down upon the table with a force which threatened to wreck Aunt Mercy's little brown bowl.

"You *are* jealous, Emeline Parlow!" she ejaculated. "Children and fools speak the truth, they say, and Tom Bennett got it right with his bein' so cunnin'. You're as jealous as a witch of anybody that wants to take Em'ly away from you!" She raised her head defiantly. "And why not? When I ain't had kith and kin belongin' to me for ten years, why shouldn't I want to hang on to the one that's been raised up in my old age? It may be selfish, but anyhow it's perfectly natural—and that young minister don't need her half so bad as an old woman like me."

Fiercely she blinked away the tears which had gathered in her keen black eyes, and resumed her potato-paring. But the half-audible remarks which fell from her lips from time to time showed the trend of her thoughts.

"That was what Sally Parsons meant, o' course!" she muttered, and stabbed an innocent potato viciously. "Lem Perkins too," she added after a while. "Everybody seems to have seen it except me." She sliced as if she were Mme. Guillotine herself. "Anyhow he don't get no more help from me!" she said quite aloud a few minutes later, laying her completed bowlful on the table. "I was a-goin' to ask him to stop to dinner, and fry some potatoes the way he's so partial to, but at last I've got my eyes open; and folks ain't got no call to unlock their doors and invite the thieves in, as I can see." With a step even more determined than usual she began her dinner preparations.

Suddenly there came the sound of cheery voices; then of brisk footsteps on the brick walk. "That's him now!" cried Miss Emeline fiercely; and she rose from her seat, and stalked to the screen door as if to repel an invader.

"I was plannin' to ask you in to dinner, Elder Thomson," she announced uncompromisingly, as Emily and her escort appeared around the corner of the house, "but I find that 'tain't convenient after all. You look awfully het up, Em'ly. I

guess I ought not to let ye go ridin' around in such a hot sun. You'd better come right in and put cold water to the back of your neck."

She hustled the surprised Miss Emily in through the screen-door which she opened barely wide enough for her to enter.

"I'll take them bundles, Elder," she announced. "You needn't bother to step in. I expect your ma's got everything all ready and waitin' for your dinner."

Meeting Emily's surprised look, as she turned back into the kitcken, she tightened her lips defiantly.

"He owes some duty to his ma," she said. "Anybody'd think he'd stay to home sometimes 'stead of sky-larkin' around with other folks, leavin' her alone in her old age."

Then before Emily could recover from her surprise sufficiently to answer she added swiftly: "What do you and him find so much to talk about —Chiny?"

Emily nodded. "Yes, of course," she said. "And oh, Aunt Emeline, I'm so hung——"

"Well, what does he have to say?" pursued Miss Emeline. "What about that missionary friend of hisn?"

Emily reddened a bit under her aunt's inquisitorial glance. "Why—er—I—— Why, a good deal, of course. Of course there is heaps to say about

China and the work there, and all. You wouldn't be interested. Isn't dinner almost ready, Aunt Emeline? My drive has made me almost starved."

"She don't want to tell me what they say," gasped Miss Emeline's aching old heart, and almost missed a beat at the stabbing thought. "She don't want me to know. Well, I guess nobody has to tell me nothing they don't want to," and off she stalked into the pantry with a gallant attempt to cover up her pain.

The pain, however, persisted, occasioning unsuspecting Emily a great deal of hurt bewilderment, and rendering Miss Emeline herself so abjectly miserable that she greeted with delight Emily's announcement that she had promised to go for a walk in the woods with little Nora O'Neill.

"Well, I'm going over to Mis' Christie's myself," she returned crisply. "I told her a week ago that I'd show her how to set up the quilting frames she found up in the attic. If you don't go and get your feet wet now, walking'll be a sight healthier for you than ridin' round in that automobile. 'Tain't good for anybody's spine to be so jounced."

XIII

"A STIFF UPPER LIP"

MRS. CHRISTIE was not at home; but her little daughter Mary was, and quite insisted upon Miss Emeline's entering. "It will be such perfectly grand practice for Delight Miller," she cried, pulling at Miss Emeline's sleeve with an eager hand.

"No, Delight, not now!" she called over her shoulder. "You go right back in the parlor and sit down and wait for me to bring in the company.

"I'm her hired girl," she explained quickly to Miss Emeline, "and Jack and Babbie, and the Hathaway twins are her children. And you're the company, of course."

"Do you mean to tell me, Mary Christie," Miss Emeline drew herself up reprovingly, "that you expect me to waste my time a-foolin' with you young ones? My day for playin' games was over fifty year ago."

"Oh, it isn't just a game, Miss Emeline," explained Mary Christie eagerly. "It's really awfully useful and good sense. Mother thinks so; and I know you will too. Why, even Mother herself plays it lots of times. Oh, do come in now

and make a call on Delight while I explain it to you. *Please!* It will help so much."

Miss Emeline hesitated a moment, recognized a possible respite from her disagreeable thoughts, and then to Mary Christie's delight decisively crossed the Rubicon of the front door-sill.

"Wal, if Mis' Christie can waste her time on games I s'pose I can," she commented, and submitted with stoic resignation to being ushered through the front hall and presented with great formality to "Mrs. Duchess Marlborough," a decidedly bashful small person in blue gingham who rose reluctantly from the sofa into which she was wedged with four lively infants.

"Now you must invite her to sit down, Delight," commanded the mistress of ceremonies, "and then ask how she is and how her children are and all her family; and then say: 'Are you going to Sewing Circle this week?' and 'What did you think of the sermon last Sunday?' and things like that. It's just as easy as pie, really.

"You see," she explained, turning back to Miss Emeline, "Delight wants to be a missionary like me when she grows up and her mother won't let her. She says she's got to be a society lady and get married. Delight hates it; so I'm teaching her Mother's rule. She says the things you hate to do are just the ones you don't know how to do right. So if you have to do a thing you hate you

must keep a stiff upper lip and play you like it and learn how to do it just the very best you can. By the time you've learned how to do it beautifully, prob'bly you'll love it for itself, and anyway you'll love doing it right."

Miss Emeline's thin lips twitched in spite of herself. "So you're teaching Delight Miller to keep a stiff upper lip and bear up under being a married society lady with four children?" she demanded with just a suspicion of a smile. "'Twould be something of a chore, I should think. 'Twould be to me at any rate."

Mary shook her head reassuringly. "Oh, no, 'twouldn't," she said. "Mostly all ladies have to do is to exchange calls and take care of their children and housekeep. Delight's going to have a hired girl to keep house for her, she says, but she hates calls and she doesn't know anything about children, so we're starting in on those. We borrow some different children every day to get her used to all kinds, for you never can tell what the Lord may send you."

"Delight, you really ought to make your twins behave better. Any lady that's entertaining company really oughtn't to let her twins stand on their heads in the parlor. 'Tisn't proper, is it, Miss Emeline?" With a vigorous hand, she righted the offending twins and reseated them firmly on the sofa on each side of their adopted mother.

Miss Emeline suppressed another smile. "Do you think it's going to work?" she inquired abruptly. "Do you like being a married lady any better'n you did, Delight? I mean Mrs. Duchess Marlborough?"

"Oh, yeth, kind of," answered Delight, who lisped a little when she felt shy. "I gueth by the time I really have to I won't mind. Mary thays that her mother hated to be a mithionary's wife at firtht."

"But she practiced up," added Mary eagerly, "till she's the best one that ever was and now she loves it. And Uncle Lem's another example too; he told me once that he didn't like being Uncle to a missionary family at all at first, and just see how beautifully he does it!"

"Humph!" Miss Emeline drew her purple-bordered shawl more closely around her thin shoulders. "That ain't no credit to him as I can see. 'Twouldn't take much starch in my upper lip to let nice folks like you—and that was my own too—come and live with me. I should like it."

"Oh, but you don't understand," explained Mary gaily. "It's too funny and unbelievable! But Uncle didn't like Father then at all! Because he had taken Mother away, you know. But he pretended he did—and now he does like everything. He says it proves that there's no dog so old that you can't teach it new tricks. Uncle is

just the funniest man that ever was. He keeps us laughing all day long.

"Oh, must you go?" Miss Emeline had risen abruptly. "I'm afraid I've talked too much for the hired girl. Couldn't you stay just a few minutes and let Delight get some practice?"

"I guess not," Miss Emeline shook her head decidedly. "You can give her all the practice she needs. I've got to be gettin' down to the village afore sundown."

And off she stalked without even a backward glance at the blushing Mrs. Duchess Marlborough and her four children who had risen obediently to their feet in response to a peremptory signal from their social mentor.

"Just young one's nonsense," she muttered to herself. "Keepin' a stiff upper lip and learnin' to like things! Just wait till they have somethin' reelly hard a-starin' them in the face; and they'll sing a different tune, I'll be bound. Take Lem Perkins now—that's 'learned how to be such a beautiful uncle'—I've got a question or two that I'd like to put to him. And there he is this minute comin' out of the post-office. It's a leadin'; and I'm going to do it. Here, Lem, Lem!"

Mr. Perkins turned his head and halted in his stiff-kneed descent of the post-office steps.

"Ship ahoy thar, Em'line," he shouted in response. "What's the news? If it's that gold-

mine out in my front yard under the laylock bush, I know that already. Jerry and Jack dug up that brass button afore I left home."

But Miss Emeline was in too serious earnest to be diverted by jokes. "I've got a question to ask you, Lem Perkins," she announced. "Your Mary there she says you got reconciled to Christie by keeping a stiff upper lip and pretendin' you liked him. Now what I want to know is what're you going to do when he gets ready to cart the whole kit and caboodle of 'em back to Injy and leave you all stark alone again in your old age? 'Tain't jest curiosity that makes me ask, Lem," she added swiftly, "an' 'tain't to make you feel bad either. I need to know."

The old man studied her face for a minute and his own softened. "Ayah," he answered slowly, nodding his head. "I see, Em'line. We're kind of in the same boat. Em'ly's a missionary too, o' course, and then there's the young elder. Well, I ain't thinkin' much about it, I tell you that. And a year ago I'd 'a' been as mad as a hatter at the bare idee. But there can't nobody live with my niece Ellen and Sissy—not to mention the rest of the fam'ly—and not learn a thing or two. They're the best preachers I know because they practice too. The thing I'm hangin' on to now is 'Don't cross your bridges till you come to 'em.' The doctor says that it'll be some time yet afore Christie

and the baby'll be able to stand the climate of Injy —glory be!—So I'm just enjoying what I've got.

"But when the time does come I shall have to stiffen up my upper lip someway, as Sissy says, and make believe I like that too! I wouldn't ever have the face not to, honest."

For one moment Miss Emeline stood and stared hard at the old man's face. There was no mistaking its rugged sincerity.

"Wal, then," she said, turning on her heel, "it behooves me, I guess, to go right into the Emporium and lay in a stock of whalebone. There ain't no starch nor flour-paste that's got backbone enough to fit my case."

Her purchase, however, fulfilled rather the spirit than the letter of the law.

"Half a dozen oranges," she ordered crisply. "And the best flavored ones you've got. I'm expecting the elder and his ma to tea to-morrow night and he's specially partial to my orange pudding."

"I wanter know," good Mrs. Simpson bubbled with interest, as she leaned across the counter. "That sounds real suspicious now, Emeline. Folks didn't just know how you'd take it about Em'ly and the new minister."

"Folks had better not count their chickens before they're hatched," retorted Miss Emeline meaningly. "Theirs nor anybody else's. I don't.

But as to my 'takin' it' as you say: I don't believe, Mirandy Simpson, there's many women in this town that wouldn't be tickled to death to have their girls get as likely a beau as the young elder." With which unconscious plagiarism from Mrs. Abby Ellwood she turned and marched valiantly into the post-office.

"Here's a letter for you, Emeline," announced Miss Martha Watkins as she entered. "It's only from New York, though. I was real disappointed. I've been lookin' for a letter from Californy for you for a week now. They've had plenty of time to get mine and answer. I didn't know you knew anybody down in New York, Emeline."

"I don't," returned Miss Emeline shortly. "Likely it's some missionary society writin' to Em'ly and got her name wrong." She pocketed the letter with the merest glance at its address. "Marthy, when the young elder comes in for his mail to-night will you tell him that I want he should step up to our house on an errand this evenin' —— No. You don't need to. There he is now! Coming here to mail a letter, I expect."

And out she pounced to the unfeigned regret of Miss Watkins who saw no reason "why Emeline should be in such a brash when he was headed right this way anyhow."

But to Miss Emeline, however, there was every reason for haste, lest her stern determination should

ooze away before her unpleasant task was done. "I want that you and your ma should come and have tea at our folkses to-morrow night at five o'clock," she announced as if she were reading a summons, "and you needn't to bother to let me know unless you can't come."

And without lingering even long enough to listen to his polite response she was off and away, leaving Mr. Hugh Thomson staring after her in amused surprise. He would have stared still harder if he had realized that his would-be hostess was busily repeating to herself between clenched teeth, "I like bein' your aunt, you young whipper-snapper, you! I like it first-rate! And anyways I'm keeping a stiff upper lip about it, that you can't deny."

XIV

THE LETTER

AS Miss Emeline came up the winding road she could see Emily, seated on the back door-step, arranging the varied trophies of her walk. Over the glass bowl into which she was crowding a wealth of white and gold daisies, she looked up suddenly to smile and wave a greeting. (How dear she looked! How natural! How thoroughly she belonged!)

A strangling, choking something clutched at Miss Emeline's throat as she gazed. (It was perfectly impossible to give her up—to *anybody!*) Why should a young whipper-snapper like Elder Thomson ——?

Then suddenly the words of little Mary Christie sounded again in her ears like a call to arms. Instinctively her thin shoulders straightened themselves and her chin lifted.

(If "that child" and her mother, and even old Lemuel Perkins could keep a "stiff upper lip," and make believe they liked the hard things that came to them, surely she, Emeline Parlow, with the

blood of 1620 coursing through her veins, could do as much and more!)

And with characteristic decision she had succeeded in pulling her face into a fair semblance of a smile by the time she had entered her own little white gate, rounded the corner of the house and reached the kitchen door.

"Here's a letter that's for you, I guess, Em'ly," she said in almost her natural voice. "It's addressed to Miss Emeline, but it comes from New York City where I don't know a livin' soul nor never expect to, so I presume likely they got the names mixed. Shall I give it to you out here or leave it on the table for you to read after you get your bokay fixed? They look real tasty," she added swiftly. "I hope they'll last all right till tomorrow night when I've asked Elder Thomson and his ma up to tea."

Emily looked at her with her face beaming. "Oh, how nice of you, Auntie!" she cried happily. "You, of course, didn't mean anything at all by the way you spoke to him this noon, but I was afraid he might misunderstand someway. And now you have made that all right! Thank you so much for bringing the letter. Just put it down on the steps and I'll look at it just as soon as I finish with these daisies. I didn't expect a letter from anybody in New York either, so I'm awfully curious to find out who has written to me."

"She's terrible tickled about that tea-party!" murmured Miss Emeline half-aloud, in her usual fashion, as she stepped into the neat little kitchen, and through the sitting-room beyond. "Looks as if there wa'n't no doubt of its bein' a go. Terrible tickled she was! And of course I'm happy as a clam at high water about it myself! She's my niece anyhow and got an A No. 1 beau!" she declared defiantly as she removed her bonnet and shawl and hung them up in her bedroom closet. "Tickled as all get out!" she repeated with a decisive snap of her thin lips, and then catching sight of her grim reflection in the little mirror over her chest of drawers she smiled in spite of herself. "Though I'm free to confess I don't show it to no great extent," she added truthfully. "Not except that my upper lip is full stiffer 'n Pa's Sunday-shirt bosom, if so could be."

"Oh, Aunt Emeline!" Emily's gentle tones sounded across the sitting-room as her hurrying feet brought her nearer, and then quite into the little bedroom. "This letter is for you after all. In answer to the one Miss Watkins sent out to California about Elkanah Parlow's descendants. It's from a man named John Parlow, who says he's descended from that Cousin John Parlow of Hingham that we've talked so much about. And he's in New York on business now and is planning to come on to Oatka Centre. Here, take it and see

for yourself. I'll get your reading glasses. They're on the sitting-room table, aren't they, where you had them last night?"

"No, up on the manteltry piece, just the other side of the clock where I always keep 'em," corrected Miss Emeline in rather a breathless tone.

Under the onslaught of so many new emotions her knees had, as she expressed it, "give right out" beneath her, and she had "almost keeled over" into her little rush-bottomed bedside chair. "Everything always comes to onct!" she murmured. "As Ma would say 'it never rains but it pours!'" The repetition of the homely phrase seemed to steady her.

Mechanically she accepted Great-Aunt Betsey's steel-bowed spectacles, and bent her gaze upon the businesslike looking sheets which Emily had thrust into her hands.

Slowly and laboriously she read and reread each sentence as if its meaning were hard to discover instead of lying plainly on the surface. Finally she looked up.

"Why, Em'ly," she said waveringly, "why, Em'ly, did you sense it? He says——"

Emily, who had been sitting on the gay patchwork-covered box under the window, rose at once, hurried across the little room and falling on her knees threw a protecting arm around the older woman.

"Yes, I know," she cried, "I know! He says that he can trace back his descent straight to that Cousin John of your grandfather's; and that as far as he can find out there are no other of that John's descendants living.

"But that doesn't prove anything, dear Aunt Emeline, not anything at all! My father died, as I told you, before I was born; and he was an orphan when my mother married him. And out in California in the early days I don't believe people talked very much about their ancestors anyway. So that's why I've lost track. And maybe that's how they've lost track of me too. But what difference does it make if they have? Not the least little bit! You and I will have each other just the same. You'll always be my dear, dear Aunt Emeline to me no matter what a thousand genealogical tables say!" Her protecting embrace grew tighter and more tight as she imprinted warm eager kisses upon the wrinkled hands which still held "John Parlow's" disturbing letter.

"Besides," she added, playfully, after a minute, with an instinctive effort to relieve the tension which was holding the older woman's face and form so alarmingly rigid, "besides, you know that means that now you have a nephew, Aunt Emeline, a nephew that can marry and keep up the Parlow name. Maybe he is married already and has a nice houseful of children, all little Parlows! Just think

what a beautiful lot of kith and kin for you if he has! And you know you'd rather have kith and kin than anything else in the world! You've always said so!"

But still Miss Emeline was silent. Then with unwonted gentleness she released her hands, with one of them cupped Emily's chin while with the other she pushed back the brown hair that shaded her smooth low brow. Back and forth, back and forth passed the wrinkled old hand, while Miss Emeline's black eyes, no longer snapping as was their wont, gazed hungrily upon the beloved young face before her.

Under the sorrow of this glance, Emily Parlow's own eyes fell at last and dropping her head suddenly in Miss Emeline's lap, she yielded to the fit of weeping against which she had been heroically struggling.

"Oh, don't look that way, dear Aunt Emeline," she sobbed. "Don't, don't! I can't bear it!"

Then at length Miss Emeline spoke—but her words were in answer to what had gone before.

"It wa'n't just kith and kin I wanted after all, I guess," she said slowly. "If it had been, why, this John Parlow and his young ones would 'a' filled the bill, I s'pose. It's got to be you that I want—and to have you belong to me so hard and fast. And now that's all loosenin' up—and slipping away—

everything that I hung on to so tight with my selfish old hands!"

Half absently she continued to caress the brown head still lying in her lap till Emily's sobs grew quieter and finally died away in gasping breaths. Then she raised it gently.

"And now, Em'ly," she said quietly, "I want you should go out and get your supper and eat it; and then go up and open up the front chamber and make the bed and carry up water and all. That John Parlow says he may be coming on here any time now and we must be ready, so as not to shame the Parlow name.

"Mebbe later on I'll come out and get a cup of tea but not jest yet. The Lord's got another lesson that He wants me to get by heart to-night, and I never can unless I get right down and let Him learn it to me Himself."

Obediently Emily Parlow closed behind her the door of the little bedroom, and stepping out into the kitchen, started to prepare her frugal supper. Everything in the cozy little room seemed strange and lonely. From the clock shelf the old Seth Thomas kitchen clock stared down upon her with yellow blankness that not even the familiar pumpkin-like phases of the moon which adorned the corners of its dial could render friendly. Its measured ticking served merely to emphasize the pall-like silence of the house. Even the gay patch-

work of Miss Emeline's kitchen rocker mocked her.

Hastily she choked down a few swallows of tea and a bite or two of bread and butter, washed her cup and plate and fled up-stairs to prepare for the unwelcome guest.

The very unfamiliarity of the unused room was a relief to her quivering nerves, and she lingered over each detail, placing the chairs first here, then there, rearranging the braided rugs, and pulling the knitted coverlet as taut as the fluffy feather bed would allow, and as straight as if its position had been adjusted to a hair.

Finally, when the lonesome voice of the whip-poor-will began to sound drearily from Mrs. Ellwood's huckleberry swamp, she straightened the chairs for the last time, and stole cautiously down the front stairway.

How frightfully the old stairs creaked under her tread! As she stepped into the sitting-room she half-expected Miss Emeline to open her bedroom door, and inquire what was the matter. She must have disturbed her.

She stood still and listened. Not a sound from that quiet room. Could it be that Miss Emeline was ill?

The sight of the bowl of daisies on the little red-covered table reminded her of the litter of fern and flowers which she had left on the back-steps after

reading her letter and she went out and carefully removed the broken bits and swept up the little platform. Then she came back to the sitting-room, and listened again. Still no sound behind that closed door. Oh, could anything be the matter? With swift steps she crossed the room and knocked gently but insistently.

"Oh, Aunt Emeline!" she cried. "It's Emily. Do forgive me but I couldn't wait any longer. There wasn't a sound, and I was so frightened. Are you all right?"

"Come in," answered a quiet voice, and Emily opened the door. Miss Emeline was sitting in her little chair beside the window. Her hands were clasped in her lap, and as Emily entered she turned her eyes away from the faint pink flush which was reflected in the eastern sky. The look of suffering had left her face and in its place there was peace.

"I was just a-watching to see the stars come out," she said. "I never thought of your getting scared, child."

Warm tears of relief rushed to Emily Parlow's eyes. "I'm so glad," she cried. "But oh," her voice broke, "you mustn't forget, Aunt Emeline, that this all means me too just as much as it does you. If you have lost a niece, I have lost an aunt. And you have a nephew anyway, while I—I haven't anybody left." Once again she knelt beside the older woman's chair.

A puzzled look flashed over Miss Emeline's face, to be followed by an eagerness that was almost fierce.

"Then you ain't goin' off to leave me in my old age?" It was Miss Emeline's own crisp voice this time. "You're goin' to stay ——" Then she sank back again and shook her head. "No, no," she said more quietly. "There's your work in Chiny —then mebbe you'll be wanting to get married some day. You've got your life to live; and 'tain't right for the old to be selfish with the young folks and hold 'em back. It all come so plain to me while I set here thinking, but land, how quick I do forget!"

There was something beautiful and touchingly childlike about Miss Emeline's weather-beaten face as she shook her head again with a wistful smile.

"Except ye become as little children," thought Emily suddenly, and threw her arms around Miss Emeline with a new wave of tenderness rising in her heart.

"But don't forget that you have me, just the same, will you, Auntie dear?" she cried. "I love you just as much as if you were my own kith and kin niece, I'm sure, and always, always shall!"

Miss Emeline smiled tenderly. "And there can't nobody never take your place, Em'ly, you know that," she said. "You've been the Lord's own good gift to me, ever since you came, and I can't

never be grateful enough. But I guess He don't want me just to let my heart grow up tight and close around you any more. Mebbe He's got something else He wants to put in it, I dunno. First I've got to learn to love you well enough not to hang onto you, and then I s'pose He'll teach me the next step. All I can do now is to wait and keep that stiff upper lip that Mary Christie tells so much about.

"And now, child," with a determined effort she regained her usual brisk manners; and putting one hand on Emily's shoulder and the other on the arm of the little rocker she helped herself to rise. "Now, child, I expect we'd better go out into the kitchen and get a cup of tea and a bite of sunthin' to eat. I'll bet a cooky you never eat proper, seein's I wa'n't there to look after you. And I guess it's going to take vittles and drink to stiffen that upper lip good and proper."

XV

THE FATTED CALF

UNDER an impassive exterior, your true New Englander hides a wealth of emotion, strong and deep. Twice or thrice in a lifetime, these emotions may overflow the banks of the underground channels through which they usually flow. But would he, like the sentimental offspring of other lands and climates, "wallow" in this inundation, or even refer to it unless it were absolutely necessary? Never!

When, therefore, Miss Emeline and Emily closed behind them the door of Miss Emeline's little room, they closed their lips also in silent recognition of the code of their race, upon all reference to the storm which had racked them there. And though each felt in the manner of the other just a touch of unwonted tenderness, no outsider would have noted any change from their every-day demeanor.

The next morning was an orgy of recipe-books. Out from the lower pantry-drawers, and down from the high pantry-shelves, they came; Aunt Polly's and Aunt Bethia's and Grandmother Parlow's, and even "Ma's Company," brought out to the light of day for the first time in many years.

And in due course, Grandmother's Election Cake,

and Aunt Polly's Sugar Cookies, and Aunt Bethia's Transparent Pie, and Ma's very best company fruit cake were drawn up in gallant array beside the orange pudding, already planned.

"Why, Aunt Emeline," remonstrated Emily, "you are working as hard as if this were going to be a real party. I never saw so much elegance! I thought you'd invited only Mr. Thomson and his mother. Why do you do so much?"

"I'm a-tryin' to do," returned Miss Emeline briefly, "in accordance with my feelings—as they'd orter be," and burst forthwith into a spirited rendition of the long-metre doxology, decidedly off key.

Then, at sight of Emily's puzzled and anxious face, she smiled. "There, there, child," she said, "don't look so scared now. I'm just actin' as near tickled to death as I know how. By the way you look, seems 's if I'm makin' kind of a mess of it, but the Lord knows I'm doin' my best." And with another burst of song, she marched off into the sitting-room, which was used for the guest dining-room, and began setting the table for tea.

That tea certainly did credit to the feelings of Miss Emeline—"as they'd orter be." Under its load of good things the round mahogany table at least creaked if it did not actually groan; and the two guests, beaming their enjoyment and pleasure, labored to eat appreciatively from each separate dish of the glory which was set before them.

Even the rigidity imparted to Miss Emeline's behavior by that stiff upper lip of hers passed unnoticed, for the "company manners" of most ladies in Oatka Centre were always rather unbending. And Miss Emily—as a hostess—was all that could be desired for graciousness and tact.

They had nearly reached the middle of the meal. With determined cordiality Miss Emeline had been commenting on the Sewing Circle and last Sunday's sermon; and then relaxing into a grim smile as she noticed how well she was obeying the social instructions given to "Mrs. Duchess Marlborough."

"And what's your plan, Elder," she inquired abruptly, "when you have a hard job to do that you don't relish at all? How'd you go at it?"

Mr. Thomson smiled. "Why, as to that, Miss Emeline," he began.

Suddenly through the rooms there resounded a thundering knock. Miss Emeline laid down her knife and fork and gazed at her guests with startled eyes. Some one was rapping upon the sacred portals of the front door. Clearly no native of Oatka Centre either. For they all were well acquainted with that fact so fundamental in etiquette that front doors, like "fore-rooms," had to be possessed by every self-respecting family, but were not to be used except on the greatest provocation.

Oatka Centre's comment, not always unspoken,

upon any stranger who had the temerity to appear on a front door-step, was that "he certainly didn't think no small shakes of himself, that man didn't."

"Land sakes alive and Goshen!" ejaculated Miss Emeline. "Who's that?" Again the sound of knocking even louder than before.

Emily was in the kitchen getting some fresh tea, so the young elder rose promptly to his feet.

"Let me go and see, Miss Emeline," he said; but Miss Emeline, with a swift premonition, pushed back her chair decidedly and shook her head. "I'll go myself," she said, and disappeared into the front hall, closing the sitting-room door carefully behind her.

"It's him," she breathed half-aloud. "I know it's him, John Parlow, and whatever in the world be I going to say?"

But when she finally reached the front door, threw it open, and stood there waiting, a grim guardian of the sacred portal, she found that the question of what she was to say need be the least of her troubles. The brown and breezy young man on the front steps was not only ready but anxious to do all the talking that the occasion required.

"Is Miss Emeline Parlow at home just about now?" he began sociably, sweeping off his hat with a generous gesture. Then before she could even open her lips to answer, he had stepped forward, grasped her wrinkled hand in his, and was shaking

it vigorously up and down as he talked. "Well, say," he cried, with hearty emphasis, "you're the lady herself. I'll bet my boots you are. Stepped right out of the old family album—you did—or would if we'd had one. Say, I'm your Cousin John Parlow. You got my letter, didn't you? Could you put up with it to call me nevvy, do you think? I'm just hankering to have a good old-fashioned aunt like you are. Living all alone, are you? Why say, what's all this?"

For Emily Parlow, "sweet as a posy," in her new pink-sprigged dimity (thought Miss Emeline, as she turned to look), had appeared at the other end of the little hall.

"That's my niece Emily," announced Miss Emeline with a grim defiance which came strangely after the breezy cordiality. But evidently he did not even stop to wonder at its cause.

"Your niece?" he cried, dropping Miss Emeline's hand and striding down the hall. "Your niece! Then that means my cousin, don't it? Gee whittaker, Cousin Emily, how'd I ever miss a posy like you when I was scaling that family tree of ours so hard, trying to find somebody that belonged to me. I shall tell that man that I paid my good money to for hunting it up just what I think of him for leaving out all the trimmings that way!"

His jovial laugh boomed through the quiet little hall as he cast his "Stetson" recklessly on the

floor in order to gather up both of Emily's little hands in his strong brown ones and shake them warmly.

Flushed and breathless Miss Emily tried to explain, growing more like a posy than ever in the endeavor, but John Parlow's cheerful voice bore hers down.

"I've always heard about the May-flowers they have here in New England," he cried, with his blue eyes beaming their honest admiration, "but I never knew they kept at it all the year round like this. And right in the family too! I call that luck!"

Once more Emily opened her lips to protest, but Miss Emeline cut her short. This certainly was no time to make unpleasant revelations.

"We've got some folks to tea, the minister and his ma," she announced, stepping forward, "and they're sitting there now with the tea getting cold, I expect. You hang up your hat, John, right here in the entry, and Em'ly'll go in and set another place for ye."

In another moment she was introducing him briefly as "another relation from Californy," while Emily was piling his plate with ample portions of all the early courses of the meal.

"Well, say, Parson," exclaimed John Parlow regarding the table, the waitress and the assembled people with beaming satisfaction, "you folks here

have sure got the parable of the Prodigal Son down fine anyway, haven't you? I never saw a finer lay-out of fatted calf in my life; and that's a fact!" And he fell to with a relish.

Some one has said that the test of success in society is to be able to talk and eat at the same time. If that is true, John Parlow was well-fitted to shine in the innermost circle of the Four Hundred. While eating as freely of all the dainties set before him as the most anxious hostess could desire, he managed to keep the rest of the table divided between interest and laughter with his racy accounts of his adventures by sea and land.

The last few years, it seemed, he had been "knocking about" in Alaska and the Canadian Rockies gathering a little money and many experiences. Returning to his native California, he had suddenly realized how alone he was in the world; and a feeling, like that longing of Miss Emeline's for "kith and kin," had sent him to a genealogist's and so to Oatka Centre, the old Parlow homestead, and the "fatted calf," to which he returned with humorous zest.

"And a good bit finer article than they raise in our section," he commented admiringly, accepting a large section of the Transparent Pie with jovial readiness. "I belong in the pie country all right, Parson, you can bet your last hunks of salt pork on that."

No inquiries about "Sewing Society," reflected Miss Emeline with a furtive semi-smile, was going to provide the stiff upper lip in the case of this undesired relative. As to last Sunday's sermon —— Well, he was well up in one story in the Bible without a doubt; and he and the young elder had seemed to "cotton to each other" with gratifying readiness, but certainly didn't have the recognized hall-marks of the early piety.

Just at that moment he rose to give an imitation of a Japanese boy whom he had once employed as a cook—imitation, it seemed, was his favorite amusement—and before Miss Emeline could catch her breath, he had transformed himself into a very obsequious Chinese waiter, who was deftly clearing the table and carrying soiled dishes to the kitchen as nonchalantly as if he had always lived there.

"Allee samee big Melican man gobble allee eatings up misee," he explained to the scandalized Miss Emeline. "All samee savee dishes take away."

No such guest surely had ever darkened the doors or lightened the atmosphere of the old Parlow house in all the years of its decorous existence.

Half anxious, half amused, Emily watched to see how Miss Emeline would meet this new cataclysm which was threatening her well-ordered existence. But Miss Emeline's thin, humorous lips were not given her for nothing.

"You shoo out of my kitchen, sir," she com-

manded, rising swiftly to her feet. "No heathen Chinee need apply until Emily has converted 'em anyhow. After that, we'll see. Now I can't send you men-folks out to look at the stock while we clean up—'cause there ain't any; and my chickens —— Why say, John, where's your satchel? I don't seem to remember any when you come in."

"Why, I left that down at the station. I thought I would come up and find out the lay of the land first and then I could locate some sort of a boarding-place. Had I better go down and get it out of hock? Do they shut up shop for the night pretty soon? Perhaps you'll go along too, Parson, and lend a hand on that lodging business."

"Some sort of boarding-place!" This time Miss Emeline was really scandalized. "For the land sakes, John Parlow, where else do you expect to stay than right with your own kith and kin, I'd like to know. The spare room up-stairs has been all ready and waiting for you ever since we got your letter. And you two had better flax right along, for the seven o'clock's about due now; and the minute it leaves the platform Himie Bradford'll lock up and go up to the Emporium for the balance of the evening. And once he gets landed in one of them cracker-barrels they say you'd think they was filled with solid glue."

XVI

REVELATIONS

THUS was John Parlow installed as a guest —"in the home of his fathers," said Mary Christie elegantly when she dropped in a week or so later on one of her frequent errands. Mary Christie was beginning to look upon life with an eye for its romantic aspects.

"In the home of his great-grandfather's cousin's grandchild," corrected Miss Emeline, whose keen eye was anything but romantic. "Only I'm free to confess that by the way he fits in, easy as an old shoe, anybody'd think he'd been born and brought right up in that up-stairs chamber. Or rather," she amended humorously, "I guess I'd hit it nearer right if I said in the kitchen and pantry. He certainly does hang around them places pretty constant. I never see the beat of that boy's appetite for my pies and cookies."

"And doughnuts!" called a jovial voice behind her. "Don't forget those doughnuts, Aunt Emeline! Howdy, Miss Happy New Year! How's yourself and how's the missionary business this A. M.? Did you ever see my famous imitation of

a homely man robbing a doughnut-crock? You didn't? Well, seeing it's you, Miss Thanksgiving, and as a special favor, I'll put on that little act right now for your benefit."

He disappeared into the pantry in two long strides and came out a moment later with his fingers tastefully strung with spicy fried-cakes after the manner of a mischievous boy.

"Best nut that grows in New England, believe me," he announced cheerfully. "Have one on me, do!" Dropping on one knee he presented his outspread fingers fantastically to Mary Christie, who laughed delightedly, as she accepted; and to Miss Emeline who briskly informed him that he was a "sassy boy" and was to get up right that minute or she should box his ears. "Besides," she rose abruptly to her feet, "I want you to explain what this means, mister!" Going to the clock shelf she lifted a candlestick that stood there, and displayed a shining, ten dollar gold piece hidden beneath. "In my cooky-jar this was when I went to put in the fresh ones this morning. Well, what do you know about that?"

John Parlow regarded the coin with deep interest between his bites of doughnut. "So that cooky-jar is the pot at the end of the rainbow that Mother used to tell me about when I was a kid. And the rest of 'em turned into cookies? I always thought they tasted like it. Gee whittaker!

What do you think of that now, Miss Fourth of July? Or don't you missionary folks put so much stock in fairies as we heathens do?"

Mary Christie laughed again, accepting another doughnut as she did so and then dropped into her serious manner. "We believe in every single thing that's nice and good," she said quaintly. "Don't you, Mr. John? Miss Emeline and Miss Emily do. And what they call me is Merry Christmas. You never seem to remember exactly. Because my name is Mary Christie, you know," she explained carefully.

John Parlow's eyes twinkled. "How careless of me!" he remarked. "How'd you reckon I got so mixed up? Oh, I know! Celebrate it, don't they, out there about the same time we do the Fourth? That's why."

"Look here, John Parlow," it was Miss Emeline's crisp tones that spoke, "you stop hectorin' that child now and listen to me. Is this gold piece yourn? And if so how did it get in my cooky-jar? Answer me that now!"

"Father, I cannot tell a lie. It is *not* my gold piece," answered John Parlow impressively. "I should call it yours, myself—findings being keepings when I went to school. And as to how it got into your cooky-jar—why don't you ask Emily? By the way, where is Emily? Out riding with that Parson fellow again?"

"Emily? Humph! I don't believe she knows no more about it than a babe unborn. In fact I'd be willing to bet any cooky that I ever made that you put it there yourself same as you did the other one that popped up unbeknownst in the old blue sugar-bowl."

But Mary Christie could no longer let the most interesting question go unanswered. "Yes, she is, Mr. John," she cried importantly. "They passed me on my way over here. And they were having such a good time, and looked so happy, you don't know! They always do, though, when they're together. I've noticed that, and do you know what we think, Mr. John? Laura Bell and Delight Miller and all the rest of us girls?" She paused with the air of a feminine Columbus. "We think that they're going to get married! Isn't that just too lovely? And won't she make the darlingest minister's wife that ever was?"

Her brown eyes sparkled with delight as she turned them upon him.

But there was no answering gleam in John Parlow's usually laughing blue ones as he answered. "Yes," he said slowly. "Yes, she would. Or for any other fellow either for that matter. God bless her." He rose from his chair rather heavily, and straightened his tall form. "Seems to me you said something this morning about wanting some wood, Aunt Emeline," he said. "Guess I'll go out and

set a few chips flying. To pay for my doughnuts," he added with an effort to regain his usual manner, "and get up an appetite to match the supper that's coming. When you get to imitating Labor Day, Miss Mary Christie, call on me and I'll be there."

A half-hour later he returned with a large armful of sticks which he sent racketing down into the half-empty wood-box.

Mary Christie had gone and Miss Emeline was stepping briskly about the kitchen beginning her preparations for supper. Now that John Parlow had come with his man-sized appetite, the meal had evolved far beyond the dainty "teas" to which the ladies were accustomed.

"Aunt Emeline," said he suddenly, mechanically brushing the chips off his coat-sleeve as he talked, "Aunt Emeline, you remember what you were saying one day—something about a stiff upper lip? When you were faced up with a hard proposition, you know. Well, say, look here, suppose the proposition was wanting something that belonged to another fellow—would you think it wasn't game to cut and run—just until you could face it out, man-fashion, you know? Because I've been thinking——"

Miss Emeline put down the plate she was carrying and stepped across to lay a kindly hand upon John Parlow's arm. "There's some kinds of things

that no stiff upper lip in the world can touch, Johnny," she said, "and nobody knows that any better'n I do. And when they come it's only the Lord's own mercy that can help you. So if He's give you the chance to cut and run for a spell till things come a mite easier, why, I should take it and be thankful. I've got to set still myself and let her go."

Like a flash, John Parlow turned and caught her two arms, looking straight into her face while a dull red flush suffused his own. "So you know, do you, Aunt Emeline?" he said. "And you think I got into the game too late too, don't you? On the whole I reckon you're not sorry either—California's being a heap farther off than the parsonage down here. But I hate like a dog to have you think I haven't got enough sand —— Only what's the use of hanging around and being miserable when ——"

"Well, well, what's all this?" cried Emily's voice from the doorway. Someway it sounded to-night to both of the listeners like a specially happy voice. "Auntie and Cousin John holding hands here in the kitchen! Tut, tut!"

Miss Emeline whirled swiftly. "John was just telling me he'd got to be going, Emily," she said, "and sorry as I be to see him go, I wouldn't lay a straw in his way if he thinks best."

"Oh, Cousin John," Emily stepped forward im-

pulsively and there was a note of genuine grief in her tone which made John Parlow's heart leap wildly, "you're not going! Auntie and I will miss you so dreadfully! The house will seem so lonesome without you! Won't it, Auntie? Ah, must you go? Well, at least not till after to-morrow. You remember we're going to Mr. Thomson's to tea. And it's going to be awfully nice! Specially!"

The light that had sprung up in John Parlow's face faded. "Why, no, Emily," he began, "I don't think I can very well wait over. I——"

"He's got to be going right off," said Miss Emeline firmly. "He's explained to me, Emily; and I understand all about it, so don't you go to making it hard for him. 'Welcome the coming, speed the parting guest,' Ma always used to say, and it's a good rule to live up to. You take off your hat now and help me get him an A No. 1 supper. We won't have many more times to cook up for John."

The next morning John Parlow left, almost weakening at the last minute before the tears that welled up in Emily's soft brown eyes as she bade him good-bye; and then breaking into his very most ludicrous "imitation" of a fat man running for the train as the young minister's little Ford drew up in front to take him to the station.

Emily wiped away the tears hurriedly as she

turned toward Miss Emeline whose usually snapping black eyes had a misty look which made her gaze soft and tender.

"He doesn't seem to care a bit about going," she said. "He knows so many people, of course, that I suppose we don't count much. Well, I must go and get my pink and white dimity to press it out in honor of Mrs. Thomson's tea." She turned away abruptly, and stepped swiftly into her own room, closing the door behind her.

By afternoon, though, she was apparently in unusually gay spirits,—almost ready to do an imitation on her own account; and Miss Emeline rejoiced unselfishly in her happiness and put it down as one more proof of the successful love affair with Elder Thomson, and reflected proudly that everybody else was "tickled to death" at the prospect: the elder and his mother and the Christies and everybody, and she'd better be too. She'd not be any wet blanket.

It was then more than a little disconcerting to be received at the door by a hostess with reddened eyelids, and a distinctly disturbed manner. No host at all was in sight. In melancholy procession they filed into the "parlor bedroom" and began to take off their wraps.

"Oh, dear Mrs. Thomson," cried Emily, anxiously laying her hand upon the older woman's arm, "has something dreadful happened? I'm

afraid Auntie and I are awfully in the way! Do tell us if we are. We can go home just as well as not. Or we'd be so glad to stay and help."

With a motion so swift that it was almost a pounce, Mrs. Thomson turned upon her. "Well, if you don't know what's happened, Emily Parlow," she cried bitterly, "nobody does. And I hope you are pleased with yourself and your actions. So I do!

"And that reminds me," she added sharply, "that Hugh wanted I should ask you to step in to the study a minute. To talk things over, I s'pose." Her voice broke in a sob.

Without a word of response, Emily slipped quietly into the hall; but Miss Emeline, with both hands lifted to remove her bonnet, faced her hostess, bristling like an angry mother-hen.

"Look-a-here, Mis' Thomson," she cried, her eyes snapping, "what do you mean by inviting us here to tea and then talking to Em'ly like that? Maybe that's manners where you come from, but 'tain't in Oatka Centre."

Like a flash little Mrs. Thomson's resentment melted into tears. "Oh, I know," she cried, burying her face in the stiff folds of her white cambric apron, "I know, and I do beg your pardon. But I'm that put about that I don't know whether I'm on my head or my heels. Look here now, Miss Parlow, how'd you feel if 'twas your boy going to

marry the wrong girl and prob'bly go off to China to live? You might forget to be polite, I guess."

Once more she rasped the starchy folds of her apron across her reddened eyelids.

With a sudden movement of sympathy, Miss Emeline stepped forward. "I guess I would," she began. Then all at once the full meaning of Mrs. Thomson's speech pricked her consciousness. "What did you mean by that—the wrong girl?" she demanded sharply. "What's wrong with her, I'd like to know."

Mrs. Thomson was a soft little woman and, except under the stress of emotion, decidedly timid.

"Why, why," she faltered, "there ain't anything really wrong with her, I s'pose, only she just ain't the one I wanted. And then going off to Chiny too, so!" Once more she forgot her fears in her grievance. "I do' know what your niece ever meant by acting the way she has," she complained. "I think it's awful queer myself; and so——"

One half of Miss Emeline's brain was saying over and over like a dirge: "Going to be married and go back to Chiny. Got it all planned out and never told me a word! Goin' to be married and go back to Chiny and never told me a word!" But in spite of its pain her loyal old heart never faltered in its defense.

"Queer? My niece Em'ly!" she ejaculated

fiercely. "Well, yes, I do' know but 'tis queer that she can take up with a young whipper-snapper like your son! But whatever else she's done, unbeknownst to her folks or not, is all right, and you can bank ——"

The sentence came to an abrupt pause, halted in mid-career by a sudden little rush from the doorway followed by a breath-taking squeeze from two eager arms.

"Oh, Aunt Emeline," cried Emily's voice, with a happy, moved little note in it, "oh, Aunt Emeline, you dear! You dear, dear thing! I don't believe you understood but I just couldn't tell you before. I promised. And nobody else is to know it for quite a long time but just us.

"Mr. Thomson is going to marry an old, old friend of his out in China. She's a friend of mine too, and it's through me they've cleared up a misunderstanding that has kept them apart for years. It was only yesterday that he heard definitely. And that's why Mrs. Thomson is a little bit angry at me; but really, dear Mrs. Thomson ——"

"Well, I do' know why your aunt should take it so hard that I'd rather he'd marry you," complained Mrs. Thomson, "and I do think it was queer of you to hand him over to somebody else like that. My Hugh's good enough for any girl."

"He is so," agreed Miss Emeline warmly. "Now 't you mention it, I kinder wonder at her

myself. And I'll bet she hain't run over his good points as many times as I have this past fortni't, or she would of."

Suddenly her smile faded and she fell silent while Mrs. Thomson and Emily fell into eager conversation about Hugh's old sweetheart in China.

This danger was over then, this trial to which she had braced herself. But an even harder one confronted her. What was it John Parlow had said? "California's a heap farther off than the parsonage down here."

Well, glory be to praise, John Parlow was gone and it wasn't likely he'd write to Emily for a while, under the circumstances. So he wouldn't have to hear this right away—perhaps never, for almost his last act had been to leave with her money to buy "that wedding present—you know, Aunt Emeline."

"And the Lord's give her to me again and I need her a heap more than any gay young feller like John," she half whispered to herself. Then suddenly her face softened into the sadness of self-reproach. "Oh Lord," cried her struggling heart, "here I be again, hard and selfish and grasping as ever. I dunno as You can forgive me, but don't give up trying, Lord. I won't."

"Em'ly," she cried aloud, "Em'ly, did John leave any address with you?"

Emily shook her head while a slow wave of color

mounted to her pretty hair. "No, he didn't," she answered. "That is, not when he went away. Once before he gave me an address in San Francisco where he said they would always forward—but I guess he's given up wanting to hear from us now."

"Oh, pooh!" Miss Emeline's tone was magnificently contemptuous. "I'll bet a cooky anybody as home-folksy as John Parlow will be glad to hear from me any time I take the trouble to write. And that's going to be to-night the minute I get home. Now you run along and see the elder, Em'ly. Mis' Thomson and me we want a good dish of old women's talk."

XVII

COMING—"THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH"

WITH characteristic reserve, Miss Emeline told her niece nothing of the contents of the letter, which she wrote that night. In her young days it had not been considered "delicate" for New England girls to talk over love-affairs even with their nearest relatives. And in minor matters at least, Miss Emeline would always continue to be ruled by the tradition of her youth. Consequently she did not speak even when, three days later, Emily suddenly decided that she really ought to get acquainted with Chautauqua before her lectures began, and packed up overnight and departed.

"I s'pose the house seemed so lonesome she just couldn't stand it, poor child," murmured Miss Emeline as she cleared away the remains of her solitary dinner. "She ain't used to it as I be; and John's the kind that his going does make a hole that feels as empty as if all the hull inside of the house was took out. Beats all how home-folksy John got just in that short time. Shows what kith and kin

means, don't it—even them that you never heard tell of? Well, anyway I'm glad I said she was going to Chautauqua."

With swift and skilful hands she washed the dishes in her shining sink, and then proceeded to sweep up the half dozen crumbs which had slipped from her lap to the floor when she had risen hastily to see if the screen-door was safely latched.

"For the land sakes," she muttered, as she slowly straightened her tall spare figure, "how messy I be a-getting in my old age! I wouldn't have had Ma or the rest of the folks set eyes on those crumbs for a good sight; and they'll toll in the flies something fearful. There's one this very minute, I believe my soul. I've got to stop thinking so much and get to work."

To Miss Emeline, as to many a New England housekeeper, summer-time had always been merely "fly-time." And from earliest childhood her mother, and the aunts who had lived with them, had trained her into a hatred of "the little pests" quite as intense as that of the most rabid sanitationist of to-day.

"They're the living sign of a slack housekeeper," Aunt Nancy had been wont to declare with the most decisive snap of her thin lips. And, of course, such bred-in-the-bone New Englanders as Miss Emeline or any of her immediate female ancestors or collaterals would cheerfully have died at the

stake rather than live on under the stigma of being "a slack housekeeper."

No modern "fly-swatter" had Miss Emeline, but a more primitive instrument, manufactured by her father from a round section of one of his own worn-out boot-legs, tacked securely to a stout handle. This had killed all the adventurous flies which had dared to intrude upon the Parlow homestead for a matter of fifty years or more, and being still very little worse for wear, would probably "last out the time" of Miss Emeline herself, as she crisply stated whenever an enterprising peddler tried to induce her to invest in some more up-to-date contrivance.

Miss Emeline always moved briskly, once she "got limbered up," as she expressed it; but by the time she had stepped to the back door and thrown out her crumbs, with many precautionary flappings of the long strips of newspaper tacked above; had taken down "Pa's" fabrication from the nail at the side of the pantry-door, and had returned to the "dining-room end" of her kitchen, the rash intruder had vanished.

"Little pest!" she said sharply under her breath, as she scanned every inch of the room, first through the comparatively mild spectacles which had for years assisted "Ma" in her knitting; and then, as a last resort, with Grandfather Parlow's powerful and sacred "fur-offs."

"Like as not he's gone into the sitting-room," she sighed, removing the "fur-offs" and pushing them carefully into their narrow black case. "And there ain't much use of my chasing him in there, for it's as dark as Egypt with the blinds all shut and the shades drawn, and my eyes ain't what they used to be, not by a long shot, even with these specs on. Land, how I miss Em'ly and John. He'd 'a' landed him for me with one crack, I bet a cooky.

"Well, I guess I'd better go down to the Emporium and buy me some of that newfangled fly-paper that Mis' Piper told me about to the sewing circle. Sticky mess, she said it was; but if it works that's the main thing, and there ain't no young ones here to go to setting down in it like her grandson Tommy did. Might as well get some more mosquito-netting too while I'm about it. It's getting kind of wore out over the pantry window, and I bet a cooky that's where that little pest got in."

She laid aside her gingham apron, tied on her "prayer-meeting bonnet" before the small mirror over the sink, wetting her finger as she did so to smooth back her gray-streaked black hair; and then pinned around her shoulders Aunt Cely's thin dark-gray shawl with a purple border. No matter how warm and lovely the day, Miss Emeline would have considered it quite indecent to step outside of

her own door-yard without wearing some sort of outside wrap.

Going into the pantry, she lifted down a blue bowl from the second shelf, took out a worn leather pocketbook which lay there, and transferred it to the roomy pocket of her own brown gingham skirt. Then, hiding her door-key under the corn-husk mat which lay on her back door-stone, she stepped briskly off toward the little village square, around which clustered the two general stores, the post-office, and the village hall.

A number of children were gathered on the steps of the hall and were talking busily as she passed, but it never occurred to her to speak to the children she saw on the street unless she had some business with them or their parents, so she went by without a glance to right or left. With the one exception of Mary Christie, Miss Emeline might almost as well have lived in a childless world.

When she returned, however, with her packages firmly gripped under the right elbow, that same Mary Christie, gay in pink gingham, flew down the steps and tucked a hand cozily inside Miss Emeline's left arm, which was lifting a small segment of her brown gingham skirt six good inches above the dust of the sidewalk in which the rest dragged.

"How do you do, Miss Emeline?" she said, giving a happy little skip to accommodate herself to Miss Emeline's energetic step. "Are you going back

home now? Goody. Isn't that nice? I have an errand out past your house and now we can both have company."

"How do you do, Mary Christie?" returned Miss Emeline crisply. "Not that I s'pose either of us is going to wait for an answer, seein's we both seem as chipper as usual. How's your pa and ma? Tell your ma that Em'ly left all of a sudden this morning for that Chautauqua place of hern. Thought she'd like to be there over the Fourth."

"Over the Fourth?" echoed Mary Christie. "Oh, dear! Then she won't be here for the circus, will she?"

"Circus!" repeated Miss Emeline in her turn. "Circus? Well, I should say not. My niece Em'ly is a missionary, Mary Christie, and don't have to look to circuses and the like for amusement."

Mary Christie giggled cheerfully. "Oh, it's only a play-circus, you know, Miss Emeline," she explained. "Our school is going to give it for the benefit of those poor little children over in Europe that have lost their fathers and their homes and everything. Miss Porter is getting it up, and of course it's lovely to help those darling things, but it's going to be heaps and heaps of fun besides. We were all talking it over as you went by. Wouldn't you like to come over and help us? Then maybe you won't miss Miss Emily quite so

much. There's lots to do, for we want to give it Saturday, so's to celebrate the Fourth."

Miss Emeline stared. "Mercy me, Mary Christie," she cried. "What idees you do have! Mixin' up with circuses and such-like goings-on at my time of life! Do you mean to say your pa and ma are going to let you and the boys be in it?"

"Why, yes indeed, of course," answered Mary with an extra little hop of joy which put her quite out of step again. "Tom is going to dress up like a clown and do all sorts of tricks. He's so funny that we just die laughing at him at home lots of times. And Jack and Billy Hathaway are the elephant—fore-legs and hind-legs, you know. And you never can guess what I am!" She paused impressively. "Madame Angelina Seraphina the Daring Equestrienne. Isn't that the grandest thing you ever heard of? Uncle Lem and I practice with Topsy every day out in the pasture. She's my milk-white steed. And Laura Bell Hathaway is the Fat Lady. She's pretty round anyway, you know, and we're going to stuff her out with pillows and make her wear walnuts in her cheeks; and of course there are heaps of other things. You'll come, won't you, Miss Emeline? Ah, please do! I'm going to bring the tickets around Saturday morning. They're fifteen cents for grown-ups and ten for children. Perhaps I ought to warn you, though, that the side-shows will be extra—only a

cent apiece, but that of course counts up, especially if you take somebody with you."

"Side-shows?" inquired Miss Emeline. "Side-shows? What's them? I never went to a circus when I was a young one," she explained. "Ma didn't think they was respectable, but of course your pa being a missionary so—even if he is having to stay home a spell—and him and the teacher gettin' it up makes a difference, I s'pose. Lots of things seem different now'days, anyhow."

Mary Christie nodded cheerfully. "Oh, goodness, yes, and then think of those darling children! You really like children a lot, don't you, Miss Emeline, even if you don't show it much?" And then, without waiting for an answer to this surprising question, "We call them side-shows," she explained, "but really they're more like curiosities. A Fat Lady would be a side-show in a real circus, but our circus is so small that she has to be a part of the main thing. So we just show any curious or funny thing we can get hold of. Uncle Lem has offered a prize for the one that gets the best—the most original, he said—you know what that means. It's a whole dollar too. Wouldn't it be grand to win it? If you think up any good idea, you'll save it for me, won't you? And I'll be around Saturday morning about the tickets."

They had reached Miss Emeline's little white gate, and after a gay farewell, Mary Christie pro-

ceeded on her way with her usual hop, skip and jump.

"She's a funny young one," soliloquized Miss Emeline, as she shut the white gate behind her and stepped briskly up the neat little walk which led around the house to the kitchen door. "Don't that beat all now—tryin' to rope me into a circus at my age! Still, if they was all folksy like her, I dunno as I should mind having young ones around so much. But land alive, I s'pose most of 'em—Ma always said ——"

She left her sentence unfinished as she entered and moved about her little kitchen, taking off and putting away her wraps, and disposing of her various packages. A faint buzz from behind the lowered shade of the sink-window drew her in the direction, but once more the intruder flew tantalizingly away at her approach.

"'Tis kind of quiet and lonesome round here, I won't deny," said Miss Emeline with quiet humor, "but I dunno, Mr. Fly, as anybody appointed you to be a committee of one to cheer my lonesomeness. Anyhow, we'll see what this newfangled fly-paper has to say about it."

With careful hand she pinned her new acquisition in the exact center of an open newspaper, which in turn she placed in the exact center of the little kitchen table, and then donning her plaid sunbonnet, she sallied forth with her roll of mosquito-

netting, tacks, and hammer to strengthen her defenses from without.

Miss Emeline was nothing if not thorough, so, finding the netting over her pantry window a little weakened by age, she decided to put in the rest of the afternoon, carefully renovating all the screens on the lower floor.

When she came into the house at supper-time, the fly-paper had already accomplished its mission. With an instinctive respect for the symmetry of Miss Emeline's arrangements, the invader of her peace had alighted on the exact center of that treacherous and sticky sheet and was already stiff and stark in death.

"Well, Mis' Piper spoke the truth," commented Miss Emeline approvingly. "'Sticky mess, but it does the business.' Now we'll see how many more come to the funeral!" and as she spoke she removed the newspaper and its burden to a place of safety in the sitting-room to make way for her supper preparations.

Apparently, however, that fly at least was fated to go unmourned by his numerous kinsfolk and acquaintances. Though Miss Emeline offered them every inducement to attend his obsequies—even to the extent of carrying his resting-place into the hermetically sealed sanctuary of the front parlor for an hour or so—at the end of two days he still lay in solitary state.

Miss Emeline realized this fact with intense satisfaction. "So you was the only one, was you, mister?" she inquired cheerfully. "Well, bein' as I don't want to go in terror of my life no longer, for fear I'll set a lamp or somethin' down onto you unbeknownst, I guess I'll clear up before Saturday by putting you out on the shelf in the wood-shed. Might as well clean out the flies there too if there is any. I didn't have enough netting to put new over that window. It seems a pity to waste this whole sheet for nothing."

XVIII

THE SIDE-SHOW

ON Saturday morning she looked into the wood-shed mechanically, intending to bring her wood-box to its usual state of Sabbath repletion. And then—Miss Emeline forgot all about her iron nerves, and her New England constitution, and threw up her hands with the nearest approach to a feminine shriek which had passed her lips for thirty years or more.

There on the edge of her fly-paper, stood a live mouse with its four feet pinioned as firmly as if they were in a vise, and squeaked at her in mingled indignation and terror.

"Land sakes alive and Goshen!—Well, if that ain't a cur'osity!" she ejaculated, recovering herself. "Wonder how long it's been there. I wish that that little Christie girl could see it now. I'll bet a cooky it's as queer a sight as any she'll have in her side-show. I declare to goodness if she ain't a-turnin' in the gate this minute. 'Speak of angels,' as Aunt Nancy used to say!"

Around the corner of the house appeared Mary Christie with the devoted Laura Bell at her heels. "Good-morning," she laughed. "Is the lady of

the house at home? We've got tickets here for the best show anybody ever saw in this town. How many dozen can I sell you, madam?"

Miss Emeline nodded in appreciation of the joke. "I never buy anything from agents," she retorted briskly. "Usually set my dog on 'em. Besides, I've got a free show right here to home. Want to see it?" She held the door of the wood-house invitingly open.

The two girls pressed eagerly forward; and then, in chorus, "O-o-oh!" they squealed. But as Laura Bell retreated hastily to the safe elevation of the back door-step, Mary turned with shining eyes toward their hostess.

"Oh, Miss E. Parlow!" she cried excitedly. "Isn't he the *cutest* thing? How did you ever think of catching him that way? Why don't you send him up for a side-show? He's lots more curious than any we've got."

"Better than yours?" demanded Miss Emeline.

"Oh, yes," agreed Mary eagerly. "I was just going to have a sign 'Merry-go-round' and when they came in I was going to go around a chair—Mary-go-round, you know. You can see for yourself that this is heaps better."

"All right," agreed Miss Emeline, moving swifty toward the kitchen and returning with a round wire dish-cover which she popped swiftly over her captive. "Take this, then, and put it in the show.

We'll slide the whole thing onto a board for you to carry."

But here the gentle Laura Bell began to register tearful but very decided protest. She had come on this trip to help sell tickets; (sob) not to carry wild animals through the streets; (sob) and she thought it would be mean as dirt to make her do such a horrid thing! So!

Mary Christie promptly admitted the justice of these remarks. "You'll take care of him till afternoon, won't you, Miss Emeline?" she begged. "Laura Bell is a lot more ladylike than I am, you see, and that's why she's afraid of mice, I suppose. I never thought of that."

Miss Emeline nodded with her crisp little sketch of a smile. "Like as not," she agreed. "Yes, I'll keep him for you, and give him some food and drink, poor thing, seein's I'm not going to put him out of his misery. Though land knows I never expected to turn dry-nurse for field-mice at my time of life. You can't never tell what you're coming to in this world. You go long and sell your tickets.

"Huh? Wal, yes. Might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, I s'pose. No Parlow never went to a circus as I know of—but the cause is all right, so I'll give you a quarter—you can call it for the mouse."

"And I'll be back right after dinner to get him,"

promised Mary as she and Laura Bell departed happily, "and I do hope you'll change your mind and come."

But changing her mind was the one thing that Miss Emeline was perfectly determined not to do.

"No fool like an old fool and I've gone altogether too fur in this young one's foolishness as 'tis, ketchin' mice and tendin' of 'em," she muttered to herself as she capably provided her captive with the necessaries of life. "It's time to call a halt somewhere. This circus business may be all right for them—I'm not saying it ain't—but I wa'n't fetched up that way."

And when Mary Christie returned, Miss Emeline, with her hair concealed in a huge sweeping-cap, had already begun to dislocate the stars in their courses by repeating on Saturday afternoon the thorough sweeping which her immaculate house always received from attic to cellar on Friday mornings winter or summer. "I've got circus enough here to home," she explained briskly, "but here's your mouse. Take him and run along. And good luck to you."

By four o'clock, however, all the motions possible to the empty task had been gone through and Miss Emeline was looking about for other worlds to conquer when she was summoned to the kitchen by the slam of its screen-door.

"Ship ahoy, there, Em'line!" yelled the genial

voice of Mr. Thomas Bennett, the village bus-driver. "Here's another box come for Em'ly. Shall I set it down here or carry it out to the shed?"

"You'd better carry it out, I guess. It's likely some more of her Chinese cur'osities, and land knows they're packed up so 't they're as messy as a load o' hay. But how do you happen to be 'round here now? Thought sure you'd be down to the circus. 'Tain't over yet, is it?"

"Nope," drawled Mr. Bennett cheerfully, "'twas good for an hour more when I come away, but I've seen 'em practice so much that after I helped Lem choose the prize-winner I thought I'd orter slip away and bring up a load or two of this dunnage from the deepo. Why wa'n't you there, Emeline?"

"Did that little Christie gal get the prize?" demanded Miss Emeline, disregarding his question.

Mr. Bennett shook his head.

"She didn't? Wal now, that's too bad," returned Miss Emeline, surprised at her own disappointment. "She was a-lotting on that dollar."

"Wal," chuckled Mr. Bennett, "you hadn't orter 'a' put in your cur'osity, then, Emeline. That took Lem's eye the minute he saw it. He said that was the oddest thing he'd seen in many a long day."

"Me? Why, I never put nothing in, Tom Bennett! Are you crazy?" demanded Miss Emeline.

"Was it Em'ly, then?" inquired Mr. Bennett.

"That mouse was marked 'Miss E. Parlow,' plain as printin'!"

"That mouse?" gasped Miss Emeline. "Why, I gave that to that Christie child for her to enter. Land of Goshen, did she think I wanted it in my name?"

"Looks that way," chuckled Mr. Bennett again, slapping his knees to relieve the excess of his pleasurable emotion. "Looks to me mightily that way, Em'line. Haw, haw, haw!"

Miss Emeline waited for no further parley. "Then you go out and dump your package out in the wood-shed," she announced briskly. "Here's the key. I've got to rig up and go to that circus."

Extra prinking was never one of Miss Emeline's foibles, but this time she really outdid herself in swiftness, and by the time that Mr. Bennett was disappearing around the bend in the road, she was turning the key of her back door, clad in her grimmest panoply of weather-beaten "prayer-meeting bunnet" and plain black shawl and gloves.

"What will the neighbors think?" she muttered to herself, tucking the key mechanically under the door-mat. "It's town's talk by now, of course. I can see 'em laugh—Emeline Parlow taking part in a circus—a circus! Why, Ma would turn in her grave at the idee! All of 'em would!" Reaching the little white gate she stopped suddenly. "The—old—cat's foot," she exclaimed. "What's that?"

No wonder Miss Emeline was startled. Bearing straight down upon her was no less a person than Madame Angelina Seraphina herself, mounted upon her "milk-white steed" and trailing clouds of glory in the shape of pink mosquito-netting draperies as she came.

"Oh, Miss Emeline," cried that Daring Equestrienne breathlessly as she came to a standstill. "We're all coming down to see you. Your side-show won the prize and it did seem such a pity for you not to be there to have the fun. So Uncle Lem said he'd come down and give it to you, and all the performers are coming too. They're marching now with the band. Can't you hear it? I came ahead to let you know."

"Look-a-here, Mary Christie," said Miss Emeline curtly, "what did you put that mouse in in my name for? I gave that mouse to you and 'twa'n't grateful of you to play a trick on me with it."

Mary Christie gasped. "Why, Miss Emeline," she cried, "don't you like it? Why, I thought you'd be so pleased! At first, you see, I supposed you meant it for me, and I put it with the other things without saying anything about who it was from. And I could see right away that Uncle liked it best. The mouse did look so awfully funny the way he turned up his head and squeaked and ate the cheese you tied to the cover. But then

I heard some of the girls saying that of course Uncle would give the prize to that, 'cause it was mine, and that it wasn't fair at all. And I remembered that you really hadn't said the mouse was for me. You just said, 'Put it in,' and so I wrote a tag—'Entered by Miss E. Parlow,' and then everything was all right and everybody seemed pleased about it. You don't really mind, do you, Miss Emeline, because I really meant to be kind and I thought you'd be glad as glad, same as I would."

There were tears in Madame Angelina Seraphina's brown eyes, and suddenly Miss Emeline's anger fled away as swiftly as it had come.

"There, there, Sissy," she said contritely. "Yes, I know you meant it all for the best, and I won't never let on a word about it if you don't want me to. If folks want to say that Emeline Parlow is losing her mind in her old age, they can. I've never let the speech of people hamper me very much in my doings for sixty year and I guess I can stand it better now than you can."

Madame Angelina Seraphina looked puzzled. She did not at all understand this reluctance on the part of the winner of such a gorgeous prize, but she smiled happily down upon her nevertheless. Grown-ups were queer, though lovable. "I'm so glad it's all right," she cried. "Look, here they come. You step right up on your horse-block and I'll have them march by so you can see them all."

She turned and cantered gaily toward the advancing crowd, while Miss Emeline climbed to her post, muttering to herself with her usual touch of grim humor, "Yes, I guess I might just as well begin to face the music first as last."

Up the road came the little procession, keeping step to the exhilarating strains of Yankee Doodle played on combs,—clowns, fat lady, elephant, and a dazzling assortment of wonderful beasts, which Adam had never had a chance to name. A jolly little group of older spectators brought up the rear. Past Miss Emeline's horse-block they swept; up the road for a few rods; and then back to a dead stop before her, while the comb band played its loudest and every hand waved a gay salute.

"Hail the conquering Hero-ine!" shouted the big jolly voice of Mr. Tom Bennett, whose wagon had mysteriously joined the procession as it turned. "Three cheers for the lady that ain't scared of a mouse! Hip, hip, hurray!"

"And for the lady that's won my dollar bill," interposed Mr. Perkins, stepping hastily forward and proffering the prize-money with a painstaking effort at a courtly bow. "Now go ahead, Tom, if you want to."

"Hip, hip, hurray," cried Madame Angelina Seraphina excitedly from the proud elevation of her milk-white steed, and the little band of "friendly beasts" bubbling over with the glorious

excitement of the day, followed her lead with a hearty three times three that made the very welkin ring, while their elders smilingly added a merry little patter of hand-clapping which, like the well-behaved child of our ancestors, could rather be seen than heard.

For the very first time in all her life, Miss Emeline Parlow looked down into a multitude of eyes shining with admiration and good-will, and listened to the exhilarating sound of her own name shouted aloud by a chorus of friendly voices.

The wine of Popular Applause is a heady draught —even to those to whom it is offered day by day. What then of one who drains its full cup for the first time after sixty years without even a suggestion of its bouquet? Along Miss Emeline's nerves stole a wonderful and intoxicating thrill, an exaltation that seemed somehow to lift her far above the shackles of habit and every-day living.

They were cheering for her—those children whose very existence for the most part she had been in the habit of ignoring. They were cheering for her—those neighbors, from whom she had expected only criticism and ridicule for her childishness. She experienced all at once an inspiring realization of the great warm throbbing heart of All Humanity, and felt her own heart struggling to catch its glorious rhythm.

With shining eyes and thin cheeks aflame, she

stepped forward to the edge of her little platform—Miss Emeline who had always declared that "'twa'n't noway seemly for women-folks to speak in public."

"And three cheers for the school that's got up the circus for the poor homeless children in furrin parts!" she cried. "Three cheers for the best children there is on earth, them we've got here in the Centre! I'm glad and proud that they let an old woman like me be in their show with 'em. And now, if Lem Perkins don't mind, I'd like to offer a prize too. I didn't get out in time to see their circus this afternoon, but if they ain't too tired to do some of their tricks over I'd like to give my new dollar bill and put another with it for prizes for them that perform the best—one for the boy and one for the girl."

Amid another and even more deafening storm of applause, Miss Emeline slipped down from her post of honor, and struggled shamefacedly to wipe away a tear or two with one hand while warm-hearted Mrs. Christie grasped the other.

"I feel just like the old woman that said 'Lawk a mercy on me it surely can't be I,'" she said with a moved undertone in her crisp voice, "and I expect you folks feel kind of that way too, but I've sensed the meaning of two big words to-day: Neighbors and Children, and mebbe I ain't quite the same woman. Who knows?"

XIX

"EVERYBODY'S HAVING REUNIONS!"

"NO," said Miss Emeline Parlow, thrusting a clean broom-corn into a loaf of blueberry gingerbread, and critically inspecting the end as she withdrew it, "the Parlows ain't goin' to have no family reunion, as fur as I've heard tell. Em'ly's coming home pretty soon and mebbe John. And then we can re-une here in this kitchen as often as we need to; and as we're the only Parlows there is left, I guess we don't need to go off into the woods and eat our vittles out of a tin pail, with the grasshoppers and ants runnin' all over us, to celebrate."

She carefully lifted the pan with a red calico holder, and banged the oven door decisively shut. This matter of reunions was getting to be a sore subject. Just at this time when she was fighting hardest against her loneliness, Oatka Centre with the kindliest intentions had flocked to her door with tales of the family reunions which everybody, it seemed, was planning to hold. Rising stiffly from her knees, she faced the guest who sat placidly knitting in the gay patchwork rocker by the open

door. "What reunions be you goin' to go to, Abby?" she demanded with an effort to keep the signs of her sore heart out of her tone.

Plump little Mrs. Ellwood creaked calmly back and forth, and gave a capable twist to the blue woolen sock she was knitting.

"Land only knows so fur, Emeline," she answered with her comfortable little laugh. "I'm free to confess I don't. None, I guess, unless the reunion fever strikes over to Sperry where the heft of the Ellwoods live. There ain't enough left of us Pearces to shake a stick at, and what there is is so scattered we couldn't get together no more'n an egg when it's broke.

"Em Caldwell, she tried to get me in on the Smiths—Deacon Caldwell's mother was a Smith, you know,—but the nearest I could make it was that Pa's uncle's wife Belinda married a Smith, for her second husband. And that—didn't—seem—real ——"

Her words died slowly away, as her attention centred more and more closely on the narrowing of her sock. Then, the critical point being safely passed, she resumed her conversation.

"Most everybody, though, can rake up a Smith somewheres on their family tree," she suggested with her throaty little chuckle. "Why don't you hunt out your Bible and see if you can't land one, Emeline? They say these reunions are real inter-

estin' occasions. I'd like first-rate to go to one myself."

The family pride, which was as the marrow in the bones of Miss Emeline's spare frame, perceptibly stiffened. She even stopped in her work of loosening the gingerbread from its tin and lifted her knife superbly.

"Well, they'll have to be enough sight more'n that before I make myself out a Smith in order to worm myself into one," she retorted with crisp emphasis. "A Parlow I've been for sixty years and over, praise be, and a Parlow I hope to stay till I die—— And no danger, as I see, of not getting my wish," she added with her eyes twinkling humorously. "It's a consid'able many years since I had a beau, as you might say."

"And his name wa'n't Smith either, was it?" returned the literal-minded Mrs. Ellwood. "'Twas that Hill fellow from over Hanset way, wa'n't he? Henry Hiram if I remember right? Now if you'd only 'a' married him, Emeline, you could have got in on his folkses'. That'll be pretty near as big as the Smiths'. There's such a sight of Hills around here."

"And plenty of hummocks that'll try to make themselves out Hills on that day," commented Miss Emeline. "I never see Oatka Centre in such a stew over anything as they are over this family reunion business. Seems if the hull village was

bewitched. Folks have been comin' here consid'able lately—count of Em'ly's being away, I s'pose, and I hain't heard nothin' else for days. Everybody's havin' reunions. And to hear most of 'em talk you'd think that was the only thing under the firmament that was of any importance these days. And as for them that's going to two! —Solomon in all his glory couldn't hold a candle to 'em!"

Mrs. Ellwood laughed her comfortable little laugh once more. "That's so, Emeline, that's so," she agreed. "And I'm free to confess that I'm full as bad as any of the rest of 'em. If I could see my way clear——" Once more her voice died away in her throat and she rubbed her free knitting-needle absently back and forth through the thinning hair above her right ear. "I wonder now," she said meditatively. "Seems to me that Ma used to say that her mother——"

"Oh, Miss Emeline, may I come in?" It was Mary Christie's cheerful little voice, and Mary Christie's cheerful little nose was visible, flattened against the screen door. "Oh, Miss Emeline, is Mrs. Ellwood——? Oh, goody—I see her!" She bobbed inside, exchanged the proper inquiries about health and the weather and then proceeded briskly to business as was her wont.

"I've just been up to your house, Mrs. Ellwood," she explained. "I have the loveliest piece of news

for you that you ever heard of! You know you said you wanted awfully to go to one of these reunions? And what do you think? It's a real Providence, Aunt Em Caldwell says. Uncle Deacon has just come back from Sperry and he saw somebody over there—a Mr. Holloway, I think—that told him they were planning to have an Ellwood reunion and he wanted him to tell you! Isn't that glorious?"

"Tom Holloway that married Silas' cousin's daughter, I expect," explained Mrs. Ellwood, dropping the blue sock and beaming delightedly. "And so our folks are going to have a reunion. I want to know! Did he tell the deacon when and where, Sissy?"

Mary nodded eagerly. "Yes, indeed—two weeks from to-morrow on Mr. Abner Ellwood's farm. Isn't that lovely? Aunt Em said it took a real weight off her mind. She felt so worked up about your not turning out a Smith after all. Only of course over at our house we would rather you had been a Perkins. That's the reunion we're all going to, on account of living with Uncle Lemuel Perkins and being his family. But it's a perfectly lovely joke, we think, for Mother, you know, was Aunt Nancy's niece and not Uncle Lem's at all—and as to Father ——!" She exploded into a little shower of giggles. "Father says it certainly proves what Uncle is always quoting about blood being thicker

than water. For he thinks the original Perkins blood must have been as thick as hasty pudding if it's strong enough now to float so many Christies into that reunion."

Miss Emeline gazed reproachfully upon her small guest—a reproach which was decidedly mitigated, however, by the large piece of gingerbread in her hand, very evidently aimed Mary-ward.

"Mary Christie," she said with impressive dignity, "your father of course is a missionary—though resting—so I ain't got no right to criticize him. But it ain't for young folks like you to speak disrespectful of the thickness of blood which has held more families together and done more good in lots of ways than anything else in this world. I wouldn't give up bein' a Parlow for nothin'. As you grow older and have more sense"—the large piece of gingerbread reached its destination, and softened the asperity of this remark—"you'll see that having good blood in your veins is one of the few things that Christian folks has a real right to be proud of!"

Mary Christie looked up and smiled cheerfully into the old face above her. She was used to Miss Emeline's manner and knew that its grimness concealed a heart in which she was safely ensconced.

"I'm so glad of that, Miss Emeline," she responded with an affectionate little pat on the hand from which she had received the gingerbread, and

with her mouth most impolitely full. "Mmm! This is the best thing I ever ate, really!—Because you see that's the other thing I came over for," she giggled cheerfully, "to tell you what perfectly fine blood the Perkins family has and ask you if you couldn't find a drop or two in your veins. We're all so anxious for you to come to our reunion. And Uncle says that it seems as if he remembered that your father was related ——"

"Well, he's got enough sight better memory than I have if he can remember any connection that I've got with the Perkinses," retorted Miss Emeline promptly. "Marryin' ain't never been what you might call pop'lar in the Parlow family for years—and as a consequence that stock has all died out even to the folks out in Californy; and Ma was a Sisson and come here from down on the Cape. You can tell your ma that I'm much obleeged for her interest, but I ain't no Perkins—any more'n I be a Smith."

"Oh, Miss Emeline," Mary Christie's voice was full of disappointment, "are you *sure?*"

Miss Emeline nodded. "It'll spile the hull Perkins reunion, I expect likely, Sissy," she said with dry humor, "but you'll all have to learn to be resigned. I ain't a Perkins, either by name nor natur'."

"Lem Perkins, though, has always been a master hand at dates and things of that sort, Emeline."

Mrs. Ellwood paused in her placid creaking to and fro to make the suggestion. "Wouldn't it be safer, mebbe, for you to take jest a peep at the Bible and settle your mind?"

"My mind's settled enough," Miss Emeline's tone was uncompromising. "Ma always said the Parlows didn't need to have no commess with the rest of Oatka Centre folks, bein', as she said, so much the best stock. But mebbe I'd orter get the Bible out of the fore-room for Lem Perkins to study. He'd know a heap more about the genealogy of this town than he does now, I'll be bound. 'Tain't *me* that wants to look in that Bible."

And yet, in less than two minutes after the departure of the guests—they left together, for Mrs. Ellwood had not been able to resist the temptation to "walk along to the deacon's" in the hopes of extracting some further information from him about the message from Tom Holloway—Miss Emeline was more than half-way across her sitting-room and "headed," as she would have expressed it, "straight for that 'fore-room' door."

"I wonder," she murmured to herself half shamefacedly, "I wonder if there's anything mussed in the fore-room. Em'ly's coming home soon, and I want everything in apple-pie order."

All at once her spare form stiffened. Miss Emeline was quite as clear-eyed about her own small weaknesses as she was about other people's.

"You're an old fool, Emeline Parlow," she commented aloud. "Go in and get that Bible if you want to and study up the family records—you've got a right to, the land knows. But don't go trying to pull the wool over your own eyes by pretendin' that you're struck with a sudden hankerin' to tidy the fore-room or study the Scripters. 'Twould be more to your credit if you was, but you ain't. It's just that reunion bee that you've got in your bunnet, just as bad as the rest of 'em. And you'd orter be ashamed for being so tart about it. Why do you have to go hankering after just the things you haven't got? And be tart with those that have? You're a faithless and perverse generation, that's what you are!"

After which uncompromising indictment she got the book and stalked back to the kitchen where she seated herself beside the table, adjusted Aunt Nancy's rubber-rimmed eye-glasses, and began to peruse the crowded yellow pages devoted to Births, Marriages and Deaths.

Hardly had she begun on this absorbing occupation, however, when the door opened and Mr. Lemuel Perkins thrust his head inside.

"Perkins," she was saying, half-aloud, "Mercy Ann Perkins married Reuben Elkanah Parlow, and their daughter, Mary Maria ——"

"Well, howdy do, Emeline," said Mr. Perkins dryly, as she looked up. "Furbishin' up your mem-

ory, are you, same as you told Sissy I ought to? And on the same book, by gorry! I guess I'll have to except your offer, seein's she's made you such a master hand on Jennie's Ology or whatever you call it of this here village. Hand her over here, Emeline. If I've got to go to school in my old age to the Parlow family Bible, why, I can go, I s'pose. Sissy seemed to think 'twas my dooty."

He extended his hand with a dry little chuckle toward the huge brown leather volume. Miss Emeline fairly gasped.

"For the land sakes alive, Lem Perkins," she ejaculated, "be you getting weak in the upper story, I'd like to know? Do you s'pose I'd *lend* anybody my family Bible? My Family Bible——!" For once words failed even Miss Emeline's well-equipped tongue, such was the enormity of the idea suggested.

Mr. Perkins' arm dropped. "Such was the offer, as Sissy understood it," he chuckled, "but o' course, Emeline, if you're busy huntin' out some way in which ye can come to the Perkins' reunion, we'll be glad enough of your comp'ny, so that——"

With snapping eyes, Miss Emeline sprang to her feet, swooped down upon the book, and in another minute was laying it imperiously in the astonished Mr. Perkins' hands.

"Well, if that's what you think, for the land's sakes, take it then, Lem Perkins, and quit your

nonsense," she commanded brusquely. "Crook your arms good now and don't let it drop and break its back. That book came over from England with my folks, I'd have you know, which is more than can be said of most folkses' Bibles around here. Why everybody thinks I'm so anxious to attend one of them reunions passes me. I guess a Parlow born——"

She stopped abruptly and straightened herself. "Well, there now, Lem," she said, with a little break in her crisp voice, "I dunno why I should add lyin' to my other sins. A Parlow's a Parlow and I'm proud I was born one, but I won't deny that I would 'a' liked to belong enough to some other folks too so that I could be in one of these here reunions that are goin' on. I'd just found a Perkins when you come in, but the one she married was a cousin so fur removed that I don't even know why Grandfather wrote him in. And it's the same with the rest." She faced her guest with a defiant little lift of the chin.

"I want to know, now, I want to know," mumbled Mr. Perkins, utterly abashed before this sudden breaking down of Miss Emeline's usual reticence. "Wal, the Lord giveth and the Lord——" He suddenly recollected that the sentence did not just fit, and stopped. "That is —wal——" he cleared his throat. "Hm—hm—wal, what I really come for, Emeline, was to bring

the paper for you to sign for Elder Thomson's salary next year. Everythin's gettin' a leetle higher and we kinder thought, mebbe ——"

"Em'ly's comin' home in a few days now. Her lecturin's over, glory be," answered Miss Emeline in her usual brisk tones. "I'll talk it over with her and mebbe we can see our way clear to do a little more for the young elder. He's the salt of the earth, if he is young, and they say he takes care of a sister as well as his ma. You call in again some time the fore part of next week and I'll let you know." Her brisk little nod unintentionally dismissed him.

Not till after the slam of the front gate told her that he was on his way down the road did she realize that he had, after all, taken with him the cherished Family Bible.

"Though I bet a cooky it was jest to be smart he asked for it," she said to herself. "Men-folks have such queer notions about what's a joke. The way it's turned the joke's more on him, seems to me, havin' to lug that heavy thing home. I do hope he won't drop it.

"But land knows it's a good thing for me that I can't waste no more time on it myself. I might 'a' been such a fool as to hunt back clear to the Ark— or the Garden of Eden if I could. And all for nothing Now I can put the hull thing out of my mind."

XX

MISS EMELINE FINDS HER KITH AND KIN

BUT putting the whole thing out of her mind was quite beyond Miss Emeline's power. Oatka Centre was positively seething with excitement over this new social development; and everybody whom she saw could talk of little else besides family reunions, past, present and to come.

Even the little Margarita, who came to sell huckleberries on the day of Emily's return, was lamenting because she and Tony could not be included in one of these gatherings.

"It ees so lon-a-ly, Mees Emelina," she said, with pathetic tears welling up in her great dark eyes. "Everybody belonga somebody. Tony and me, no belonga nobody."

"Why, sho now, Margarita," Miss Emeline's voice softened as it always did for the little Margarita, "don't you take on now. You and Tony belong here with us folks, we always think, don't we, Em'ly? Ever since the time you was sick here. And you shall come to our Parlow reunion. We're going to hold it down in our wood-lot next Saturday afternoon, weather permittin'. It's goin' to be a picnic. You and Tony can bring the blueberries if you want to. Tony can get off, can't he—Saturday afternoon?"

Margarita was radiant. Of course Tony could get away on Saturday afternoon—on Friday—or Thursday. Apparently he could get away immediately if Miss Emeline wanted him. What was a job—even Tony's boasted "steady job uppa da railroad"—compared to the fact that they were invited, both of them, to join in a real family reunion and their beloved Miss Emeline's at that?

It was with some difficulty that they persuaded her that Tony's presence was really not necessary until Saturday; but at last they succeeded in turning her energies into a safer channel. And off she started, glowing with happiness, to begin at once to pick her berries, regardless of the days which were yet to elapse.

"Have-a plenty!" she said with her white teeth flashing, "grand-a, grand-a plenty!" Her wide-flung arms served to indicate a universe full of blueberries.

When she had gone Miss Emeline turned to her niece and surveyed her amazed countenance with austere amusement.

"You needn't look so flabbergasted, Em'ly Parlow," she announced crisply. "And no more you don't need to send for Eben Slocum nor any other doctor to come and put me in a straight jacket. I ain't reely lost my mind—likely as it seems.

"Here's the whole story in a nutshell. Every time lately when I've been reading my Bible—the

little one I mean, Lem Perkins not having fetched the big one home—somehow I kep' a-runnin' onto that verse about not invitin' your own folks nor yet your rich neighbors when you give a dinner or a supper, which I s'pose likely means picnics too.

"Land knows I ain't one to blame folks that does invite their own—I would too quicker'n scat if I had 'em—but it jest seemed to me that mebbe the Lord was a-pickin' me out special to obey that command of Hisn—anyway He'd fixed it up so 'twas special easy for me to.

"So I've begun a-countin' of 'em up, and a-askin' round. What with the Hills and the Hathaways and the Perkins and the Smiths and the Thurstons pretty near everybody was bespoke. But countin' you and me and the young elder and his ma, there was fourteen all told that didn't have no kind of a claim nowwhere. Pretty small for a reunion o' course, but enough sight better than two! And them twelve I see that I'd have to adopt into the Parlow family for one day, anyhow, for that was what they all wanted—a family reunion—same as I did.

"I balked at that part consid'able at first, for the Parlow name and blood has always meant an awful sight to me, but the more I balked the plainer I seemed to see it.

"I hadn't quite give in, though—I was a-waitin' to talk it over with you—but then I hadn't thought

of Margarita and Tony—poor lonesome little critters in a furrin land, and all of a sudden when she spoke to-day I sensed how they felt, and that I'd got to have it for them if for nobody else, so I decided right off.

"Now I write down a list for you and you must flax around with it spry afore Margarita lets too many cats out of the bag. It's to be a Parlow reunion, you must tell 'em all, and I've worked out a reason why each of 'em belongs except the elder and that don't matter. Folks can always fit elders' families in. Old Mis' Towers, she used to work for Ma; and Lame Barret, he helped Pa in the sawmill; I've got 'em all wrote out, and you can learn 'em off as you go. The little Sayre girl that works over to the poorhouse, she's the furfetchedest. I couldn't think of one living thing for her till yesterday when Mary Christie dropped in all keyed up about a plan she had. She'd read a piece in the paper about a John party that somebody'd give, and so o' course she decided right away she must have a Mary one—bound and determined I should be in it too 'cause Mary's my middle name. I never see the beat of that child!

"Well, all of a sudden it popped into my mind that that Sayre girl's name was Emeline—Liney, they call her, same as Ma used to me—and so o' course that settled that hash for me—and you can tell her.

"The only thing that troubles me is about Ma and Pa and the rest of our folks. I'm afeared they'll think it's a disrespect to the good old Parlow name to invite the sort of folks I have and call it a Parlow reunion—rag-tag and bob-tail Ma would call 'em, I know. But someway I couldn't see it no other way; and I'm hoping the Lord will make it clear to 'em that I'm lookin' on them I've asked as kind of His special folks—give to me in place of the kith and kin that He's took away. Do you see, Em'ly, and do you think they will?"

With quick tears in her eyes, Emily Parlow kissed the older woman's anxious face.

"I'm sure they will, dear Aunt Emeline," she cried. "Being up in Heaven right with Him, they must be learning about Him even faster than you are down here, so I don't think you need worry about that any more."

With characteristic dislike of the self-revelation into which she had been betrayed, Miss Emeline veered back to the commonplaces of every day.

"Well, then, if that's all settled," she declared briskly, "we'll attend to the rest of it. Do you think you're too tired, Em'ly, to go around and give the invites now? I want they should all have plenty of time so that there won't be nothin' else to prevent. Now 't I've made my plans, I want 'em all to come."

Emily laughed gently. "Not a bit too tired, Aunt Emeline," she answered. "I'll put on my hat and go right away. But I really don't think you need to worry about their not coming. Mr. Barret and Mrs. Towers and the little Sayre girl don't have so many invitations, I fancy. And even if they did, I believe any one of them would cancel any other engagement for the joy of belonging for once to a real family party. You see, Aunt Emeline, I know just how they feel!" She threw her arm impulsively around the older woman's waist. "And I'm sure they'll all come, and what's more, they'll come early—most of them. Old Mrs. Towers always says she likes to get into 'the forefront of the offending,' and no doubt she'll do it this time."

"Humph," retorted Miss Emeline, trying to conceal her gratification. "I guess nobody won't be in such a yank to get to my party as all that. Everybody don't feel about families as you and I do—specially the Parlow family."

But Emily proved to be a true prophet. Long before the time appointed, every guest was standing, wreathed in smiles, in Miss Emeline's neat back yard, or getting "right under foot everywhere I step," as she remarked sotto voce to Emily, in her spotless kitchen. Miss Emeline's mounts of transfiguration were bounded—as is the case with most of us—by the valleys of petty irritation.

But at last they were off down the shady little lane which led to Miss Emeline's wood-lot, a happy little procession headed by Deacon Caldwell's light wagon, proudly driven by Tony and bearing Miss Emeline, "Lame" Barret, Grandma Towers and the eatable portions of the "picnic"; while Emily and little Liney Sayre brought up the rear.

"And now I guess we might just as well pitch right in and feed 'em," said Miss Emeline as Emily came up. "Grown folks to a picnic is jest like children to a party. They don't feel as if they was there till they begin to have their treat.

"Land o' Goshen, Em'ly Parlow! Will you look at the tables and seats the young Elder and Tony fixed up yesterday! Enough to 'commodate a regiment!

"Look-a-here, Elder Thomson," she hailed the smiling young man who was passing near by, "if you wa'n't a minister I'd think you couldn't count up to sixteen, by the looks of them seats. Whatever did you make yourselves so much extry work for, I'd like to know. You didn't have to fix enough places for the hull of the Centre!"

The "young elder's" smiled broadened. "Well, you see, Miss Emeline," he began slowly, "I was thinking that something might happen—something—perhaps—like that —— Look!"

Gently he turned her about and pointed toward the lane up which they had so recently come.

"For the land sakes alive!" gasped Miss Emeline. "What in the world ——"

There before her was indeed the whole of Oatka Centre—advancing down her own shady wood-road, laden with baskets and boxes, with pails of lemonade and coffee-pots. And their smiling faces were all turned eagerly toward her. Suddenly a few of the more irrepressible spirits broke into a cheer, and the whole crowd surged forward.

"Whatever in the world?" repeated Miss Emeline weakly. "Whatever in the living world!"

"Just the people that I fixed the seats for," the young minister explained blithely. "They wanted me to speak for them, and I will as soon as they are near enough. In the meantime ——" he took off his hat and waved it boyishly. "Welcome, friends!" he shouted. "Welcome, everybody! Can you all hear? Come right up! All right then!" He turned back to Miss Emeline. "They want me to tell you that these are the Hathaway and the Perkins and the Smith and the Hill and the Thurston reunions," he said. "Mr. Perkins and Mrs. Christie have studied up the records in your family Bible, away back to *May-flower* times, and they have proved that you could attend any of these reunions that you chose to honor. But when they heard of your reunion they felt that you had found the very best sort for yourself—so they have come to ask you to let them belong to it too. You

don't want anybody to feel left out to-day, do you, Miss Emeline?" his voice dropped coaxingly. "So won't you let all of them, the Thurstons and the Hathaways and the Smiths and the Hills and the Perkinses be adopted Parlows too?"

Miss Emeline gazed at the smiling faces before her and a strangely exalted look came into her black eyes. Suddenly she stepped forward, once more lifted quite out of herself and her usual reserve.

"Yes!" she said clearly, "I will. And I welcome you kindly one and all, as if you were really my own kith and kin. For you are. You are! That's what the Lord's given me to see to-day. For years I lived there in the old Parlow house with my Parlow folks, with no thought for nobody outside, till finally the Lord took 'em all away. And then one day I prayed in my lonely heart for Him to give me some more of my own folks—not believing much, but still I prayed. And Emily come and I thought that was the answer. But 'twa'n't. Not all of it—nor yet John. The Lord meant to give me even more than them two—dear as they be. And to-day He has! And it's you—my neighbors that I've lived with for sixty years and the children that have been growing up around; and the new ones too; the elder and his folks and little Margarita and Tony that the Lord Himself led me to. And the old friends that I've just got acquainted

with." She smiled at Mrs. Ellwood who stood in the front ranks. "I needn't never lack for kith and kin any more—and neither need any of you ——" She laid her hand gently on little Liney Sayre's shoulder. "And that's what the Lord's promise means: 'Before they call I will answer.' You was here—belonging to me—all the time; only I didn't have the eyes to see! You was all my kith and kin."

Her wrinkled old face, transfigured by feeling, was strangely beautiful as it smiled upon them standing silent, almost awestruck, before her.

Then suddenly the spell was broken. From somewhere down the lane there came the sound of merry shouting; and turning to look they saw a man running toward them and swinging his hat jubilantly on high as he came.

"Why, it's John Parlow," cried the young minister eagerly. "It's John Parlow! How perfectly fine! Were you expecting him?" He turned from Miss Emeline to Emily.

The wild rose flush that sprang into Emily Parlow's cheeks was almost answer enough, without words, but she added shyly: "Why, I wrote him, you see, as soon as Auntie planned about the reunion and we hoped he could get here as a surprise for her. But ——"

In a minute more however John Parlow had made his way through the friendly laughing crowd and was ready to speak for himself.

"Why say, Aunt Emeline," he cried, as he greeted her, "don't tell me I'm here too late for the speeches! That's too bad now. Well, then, I reckon I'll have to make a speech myself. I'm so full I'll probably explode if I don't." His big jolly voice and magnetic smile included all the little gathering. "I want all of you folks to help me spring a surprise on my Aunt Emeline," he said. "Emily here—bless her heart!—has promised to do a missionary job with me as heathen—all the rest of my life. That's no surprise to Aunt Emeline, I reckon—having had all the latest news from Chautauqua two or three times a week. But what she doesn't know, and I didn't myself for sure till this morning, is that I've just bought the old ship-yard down here and hired a crew to build sloops. So if she don't object—nor any of the rest of you Parlow folks in congress assembled—Emily and I will settle right down here in the old Parlow house and keep Aunt Emeline's pies and doughnuts from spoiling the rest of our lives!

"And say, if Aunt Emeline says yes—Do you, Aunt Em?—Gee whittaker, she does!—Let's all give an imitation of a Family Reunion that's going to have more ice-cream and pop-corn and candy given to it than it can put away in all day! Come on now, boys, all together: Hip, hip, hurray!"

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